

# Self-Injury: When Pain Feels Good



By Edward T. Welch

If you have never purposely hurt yourself, it seems impossible to understand those who have. After all, don't living creatures *avoid* pain?

But, if you *have* purposely hurt yourself, such behavior seems necessary, normal, even right. In fact, like a diabetic giving herself an injection, it can feel like a temporary cure.

This article assumes that you feel trapped in a cycle of intentional self-injury. Some asides are directed to loved ones who are listening in. If you want to help, realize that cutting and similar behaviors have their reasons—and you even will find similar roots in your own heart. If you are the one who feels trapped by the behavior, know that the cure is much more attractive than you think. Right now, you may hate your behavior, but you also feel like you need it. Self-injury might be your way to protect yourself from something worse. To give it up feels like a huge risk. And it would be – if you had no other alternatives. But there is a better way.

## ***Anyone Feeling Alone?***

No doubt you feel alone and isolated. You are reluctant to talk to people who want to help.

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People just don't talk about purposeful self-injury. No one mentions it in normal conversation. Though the behavior thrives on silence, those who self-injure number in the millions.

Fiona Apple, Garbage lead singer Shirley Manson, and actresses Angelina Jolie and Christina Ricci are just a few celebrities who acknowledge past problems with cutting. But this human behavior has been around for a long time with a variety of motives. The Bible describes ancient idol worshippers who "slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed" (1 Kings 18:28). They believed this would appease their god. The practice even appeared in Christianity during the Middle Ages, when self-flagellation and other harmful practices were common forms of penance. It continues among Shiite Muslims and devout Hindus with their very public self-mortification. Meanwhile, in the West, our openly indulgent culture looks, on the surface, to be too modern to support such forms of penance and asceticism. But people don't change that much from generation to generation, and cultures are more alike than different. Beneath American culture you will find encouragement for more private forms of self-denial and self-abuse.

You are not alone. That might offer little comfort, but if other people have had similar

experiences, maybe there is hope that you can be known and helped.

### **What Is It?**

Self-injurers do various things. Nail biters don't stop until their fingers bleed. Pickers pick and scratch until they damage their skin or inflame old wounds. Cutters always have a razor blade handy to score, mark, or slash their body. Others punch themselves black and blue or burn themselves with cigarettes. Some break bones.

Anorexia, or purposeful starvation, is a form of self-injury that can accompany other forms or act as a gateway to further self-abuse. Men and women who severely restrict their diet are perfectionists who can never be perfect. They also try to hide from their feelings, which creates an environment in which cutting and hitting can thrive.

All this sounds like a death wish, and self-injurers *can* be suicidal, but there is a difference between the two behaviors. Those who

Maybe you could practice what to say with a wise friend before you speak to others, but, at some point, you need to talk.

Of course, it is hard to talk when you don't know what to say, so you have to slow down and consider what is happening. The self-injury cycle has its reasons, but it quickly becomes automatic. Your emotions tell you what to do and you robotically respond. Lies become a way of life that distances you from people who love you and could help you. Yes, slowing down can seem dangerous when your inner screams are getting louder and you feel that your only escape may soon be blocked. But there is another way. It is a path of wisdom, and wise people begin it by considering their ways.

### **The Cycle**

Anything that arouses unwanted emotions can trigger the self-abuse cycle. Trouble in relationships are common prompts. Also look for anything that provokes shame. It could be

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purposefully cut an artery are trying to kill themselves. They want life to be over. Cutters tend to be more careful about where or how deeply they cut. They just want to feel better. Self-abusers typically want to live; they just don't know how to live with turbulent emotions.<sup>1</sup>

### **Slow Down - Consider Your Ways**

If friends or parents love you and think you are in danger, they set out on an immediate rescue mission. They panic. They hover. They feel they must do something like stand guard over you and stop you before you do something even more serious. They seem intrusive, but consider what *they* are witnessing.

They *should* panic! It looks like suicide to them, and you haven't given them reasons to believe otherwise. You need to talk with them.

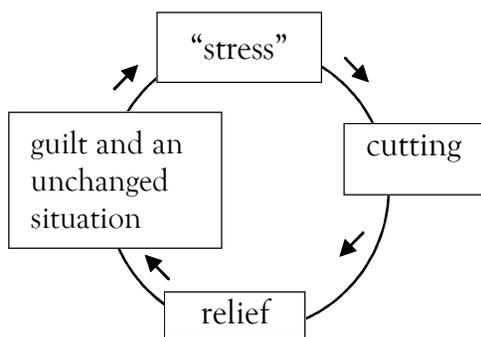
shame from something you did or something that was done to you. You might feel as though you have violated a personal, cultural or divine taboo. Perhaps you just don't tolerate your own humanness with its imperfections, weaknesses, dependencies and sins.

These beliefs, personal experiences, and external circumstances mix into a stew of raw emotions that can include anger and frustration, anxiety, or a jumping-out-of-your-skin agitation. Without alternatives, self-injury gradually becomes the preferred response to these feelings *because it works*. You regain control. Your emotions are back in check. The screams within have been temporarily silenced. The vortex that threatened to pull you under has calmed. You have diverted the torrent of feelings. You now have a focal point that can keep you in the present rather than get pulled back into past images. In short, self-injury brings peace. But it doesn't tell you that when peace fades, the same circumstances and emotions are waiting to disrupt your inner world

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<sup>1</sup> Self-abuse should also be distinguished from an autistic person's head banging and other self-harming behaviors, as well as a schizophrenic's response to directive, hallucinatory voices.

again, and the cycle continues.



### **Why Self-Abuse? What Is the Behavior Saying?**

It seems automatic, even instinctive, but there is logic to self-inflicted pain. You do it for a reason. Think, for example, if you were to hurt someone else. You would be saying that you don't like that person. You hit an enemy, someone who makes you angry. It sounds too simple, but you might be angry at yourself and think that you deserve to be punished. After all, anger is a moral judgment. It says that something or somebody is wrong. In this case it is *you* who is wrong. You might feel as though your body betrayed you. Perhaps you were sexually assaulted, and have started to believe, "My body is bad." As a woman, you could reason that if you had a male body, you wouldn't have been violated. Therefore, your female body is bad. Of course, the perpetrator is the real culprit, but you can at least understand the logic of the self-injury. These behaviors have a meaning. They are a kind of language that is saying something.

Sometimes the language is simple—"I hate myself." Other times the language can be dense with layers of meaning. What is common, whether the meaning is simple or complex—is that all self-injury is an attempt to make life work without turning to God and trusting Him.

Here are some samples of the language behind self-injury.

**"I am guilty. I must be punished."** This particular logic actually reveals keen insight—to a point. The reality is that, before God, we all are guilty and deserve punishment. We have broken His laws and tried to make life work apart from Him rather than depend on Him. We

followed our own desires rather than acknowledge that He is Lord. So, yes, you are guilty. The problem is in how you deal with your guilt.

First, realize that guilt is not as hopeless as you think. The Spirit of God reveals that we are all guilty. As such, if you experience guilt, God is on the move in your life. It is evidence that He is near.

Next, understand that God has a particular interest in our struggle with guilt. Knowing that we are powerless to cleanse ourselves from even a speck of wrongness, He shows us another way. Throughout Scripture you will find that God pursues people who are failures. When they finally stop running from God, they find that God is not looking for their blood to wash them from guilt and sin. Instead, He provides the sacrifice Himself. In the Old Testament, the sacrifice was the blood of animals, but it was never intended to be a permanent solution. After bringing a sacrifice, you soon had to bring another, then another, and it went on this way, day after day, year after year. The routine intended to prepare people for something much better. All the sacrifices anticipated the time when God would provide the better sacrifice through Jesus.

Cutters have much in common with those who lived during Old Testament times. Their sacrifice is never enough. They have to come back to the priest tomorrow and do it all again. The difference is that at least those living in the Old Testament could sacrifice animals. You, instead, use your own body.

You have it partly right: when you feel wrong or unclean, blood is the answer. Actually, death is the answer, and blood symbolizes this price that must be paid for our guilt. What you deny is that only Jesus' death is able to truly wash our souls.

**"I am not perfect."** This is akin to guilt, but no obvious sin is involved and you aren't too concerned about God. Still, you sense that you have violated a standard, or are wrong. But these standards are your own. You didn't eat perfectly. Someone criticized your important project. You didn't look the way you wanted. Your feelings imitate guilt, and some kind of penance seems like the only answer.

**"They are right; I deserve this."** If self-

injurers were sinned against by others, their behavior can be a way to agree with, or approve of what was done to them: "Yes, you hurt me because I *deserve* to be hurt." It is a convoluted strategy to make sense out of the abuse. Blame yourself for what was done to you and you feel like you have more control. You can hurt yourself before someone else can.

If this resembles the language of your heart, you are still trying to make life work apart from God. At best, you are trying to make yourself OK before you approach him. You deny that he approaches *you* and says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock" (Rev. 3:20).

**"I am angry."** Anger is frequently a message in self-injury. It can be a more aggressive way of saying, "I am guilty and deserve to be punished," but it often includes anger toward another person. You have heard how some people take out their frustrations on a punching bag. Others take it out on the family pet. Self-abusers use themselves as the punching bag. "I hate you," is the refrain. Sometimes you don't know if you are talking about yourself or someone else.

God is more a part of this than you think. Notice how it is all part of a larger system. You can't believe that God forgives you, so you have no reason to forgive others. You believe that you have to do something to rectify your relationship with God; therefore, other people have to do the same thing with you.

If this comes close to your experience, it means that you do not believe the gospel. The gospel, or good news, is that God forgives us because of what Jesus did—He was perfect—rather than what you do. "In the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last" (Rom.1:17).

**"I can't feel this way any longer. Hurting myself is the only way to stop my feelings."** When emotions seem overwhelming, you want them to stop. You need them to stop. Otherwise, they will kill you, drive you insane, or . . . you don't know what will happen. You predict, however, that it will be bad. Self-injury temporarily relieves the pain, focuses your attention on the present, and leaves you feeling that you have regained control.

One problem is that each time you hurt

yourself you isolate yourself further from other people, and the isolation is part of the problem. When you ask other people for help it breaks down barriers. When you try to do it on your own, and when your plan includes behaviors which prefer privacy, you become increasingly alienated.

**"I feel out of control (and other people have been in control). This way I can gain control (and no one can stop me)."** When self-injurers can find words, they often speak about "control." They feel out of control and they want to regain control. They feel like other people have had control, and they want an area of life where *they* are in control.

Self-control is a paradox. Strive for it and you always miss it. Give up the quest for control, however, and trust the God who is in control, then the world no longer feels like a maelstrom that is sucking the self out of you.

Notice how the path keeps leading back to God. It naturally goes there. We were made for him. As Augustine said, "You made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until we find our rest in You."

**"Words cannot express my pain."** Human beings usually put experience into language. When happy, we sing. When sad, we cry out. Emotions want to be communicated. But what if there are no words? Words are the first step to understanding. Before you learn the details about anything, you learn its name.

Self-injurers sometimes feel like they can't even get to step one. They feel something but it has no name. The experience is intolerable and its namelessness makes it worse. The only answer seems to be to subdue this nameless creature by inflicting other experiences that *can* be named. For example, if you cut yourself and it begins to hurt, you recognize the pain. You know its origin. It seems more manageable.

**"Help!"** Some self-injurers want to keep their behavior a secret. It adds to the meaning of the ritual. But many want help and don't know how to ask. Their self-abuse rituals are means of calling out for help. To ask in any other way is too great a risk. First of all, it is humbling to ask for help, and no one volunteers for humility. Also, what if you actually ask for help and no one answers? Or what if no one knows how to help?

If this sounds similar to the language of your self-injury, think even more deeply. Have you ever heard of wives who wanted something from their husbands but wouldn't tell their husbands what they wanted? Their basic belief was, "if you really loved me you would know." Then, when husbands invariably fail the test, wives feel justified in feeling rejected or angry.

This is such a strange way to go about a relationship that it raises the possibility of other motives. Perhaps the real goal of such behavior is self-pity and anger, which can be its own reward.

This might not capture your particular experience, but you can recognize it as universally human. Dig around and you find a lot of "self" motivating our behavior. You don't injure yourself for the good of others. Instead, it is about you and how you make your own life work.

Notice how this bridges the differences between yourself and those who don't understand self-injury. At the core of our lives we can easily find our common ancestry. We are

will . . . ." If this is all you understand about self-injury, you understand enough. There is a way out that will not destroy you.

### ***Going Deeper: What Self-Abuse Really Says***

Even though we might nudge the knowledge of God to the margins of our lives, everything we do relates to Him, including self-injury. Self-injury is, at its root, about God. Avoid Him, and we miss true hope.

It works this way. Sometimes we can see the direct connections between God and ourselves. When we are in desperate straits, we might call out to Him. When we have violated His commands, we feel guilty.

Other times, the connection is less clear. Consider anger, for example. Anger is not simply a powerful emotion. Angry people declare an action to be wrong, and pass a "guilty" sentence on someone else. In doing so, angry people either represent God and His justice, ultimately trusting *Him* as the righteous judge, or they set themselves up as judge, standing in judgment ultimately even of God.

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all familiar with fear, anger, misery and guilt, and we all have instincts that drive us away from God when good sense indicates that we should embrace him. Our problem isn't with self-esteem or self-love, although these often feel like our deepest problem. Scripture consistently alerts us to how selfish desires (James 4:1-3); pride and self-interest rule our hearts. When we really think about it we are *too* concerned about ourselves and are unfamiliar with what it means to truly and selflessly love others.

All this is an effort to slow down and think. Identifying the purposes of self-injury is a useful step. Your emotions can be like a newborn baby who cries non-stop; when you understand the meaning behind the cries, you can help. In self-abuse, the cries are sometimes highly expressive, revealing the complexities of the human heart. Other times they are fairly simple: "I can't handle this feeling any more, and cutting eases the stress. If I don't cut myself, I

Wanting to have control in our lives follows a similar pattern. It doesn't always seem to be about God, but it is just a matter of filling in the blanks. For example, "I want control because other people have had control and I do not want that to happen again. *Yes, God is over all things, but He is the one who allowed bad things to happen, so I don't want to trust Him either.*"

What about all the standards and expectations that threaten to wreck our lives—our parents' expectations, our cultures', our friends', our boyfriends', our spouses'? "Be smart." "Be attractive." "Be successful." "Be important to someone." These are not God's standards but they certainly can control us. Ultimately, these too can be traced back to our relationship with God. These standards are more intentional than they seem. They are part of our own private religion in which we are the law-giver writing our own Ten Commandments on Sinai. *We* determine the standards rather

than let God judge the standards and expectations that multiply throughout our lives. Simply put, beneath these many standards is a desire to be your own god.

Contrast this with the perspective of the Apostle Paul.

It is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. . . It is the Lord who judges me. (1 Cor.4:3,4)

Our behavior reveals our relationship with God. The reason God is foreign to so much of our conscious thought is that we *want* Him to be distant. Our sense is that He makes demands on us that we don't want. In our hearts, we want a kind of friendly divorce where God goes his way, we go ours, and no one is hurt. That however, is not how life really works.

God created us for Him, to be in reciprocal fellowship. For our part, this begins as we believe what He says and trust Him. To believe, of course, is not as easy as it sounds. To believe is to accept a lavish gift, and we are uneasy when we have nothing to give in return. We frantically look around for something to offer, such as our deep contrition or our self-loathing. This feels right at first, but it's not. A great gift calls attention to the generosity of the giver. It reminds us that we could not secure the gift on our own. This means that any response to God's gift, other than thankfulness and praise, demeans the generosity of the giver and exaggerates our moral ability to contribute to the gift's cost. It means that we are looking at what we do rather than what God has done. God tells us to come to Him with empty hands, but we want to wait until we feel more worthy.

### ***Put the Silence into Speech***

Even the simple and desperate cry, "I can't feel this way any longer; hurting myself is the only way to stop the feelings," is about God. At first glance this too seems unrelated to Him—and that is just the point. When we cry, but *not* to the One who hears us, we are saying that God doesn't hear, care, or love.

Children who are hurt run to a parent who will listen and show compassion. As creatures in relationships, we share our pain with those who love us. If we do this with people like ourselves—imperfect lovers who are rarely

powerful enough to do anything—how much more should we cry out to our heavenly Father, who loves perfectly and responds to our cries?

When His people experienced trouble, the Lord said, "They do not cry out to Me from their hearts but wail upon their beds . . . They do not turn to the Most High" (Hos. 7:14,16).

God is talking about (and to) hurting people, inviting them to turn to Him, but they prefer the isolation of crying on their bed. This self-oriented posture pervades history. In our misery we are simply not inclined to turn to the Lord. As a result, human history and our individual stories are cycles of turning toward the Lord and turning away from Him. "Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and He saved them from their distress," is the recurring chorus of the Hebrew people (Psa. 107). Our wandering hearts don't turn once to the Lord. They stray, then return to Him, over and over again.

One reason we would rather turn to another human being is that there are fewer strings attached: we call out; they listen. But when we turn to the Lord, our fundamental allegiances change: we call out, He listens and acts, we follow Him. Turning to the Lord leads to our very lives finding residence in Jesus Christ. For people who want independence and personal control, as some self-injurers do, this is too high a price. But, even then, the Lord invites us.

The invitation comes with a promise: "For the Lord will not reject his people" (Psa. 94:14). If you feel as though you are not good enough to come to Christ, you have met the standard for coming! The invitation goes to people who feel like they can't measure up. But if you feel as though you are worse than the worst, be careful. You might be minimizing the love that Jesus has already demonstrated by suggesting that God's love has human-like limits. You might be making a religious-sounding excuse that gives you a clear conscience about avoiding Jesus. If you reject an invitation to a wonderful party by saying you aren't worthy, very likely you just did not want to go.

### ***Cries of the Heart***

Let's assume that, on some level, you are reluctant to turn to the Lord with your pain,

confusion, and self-absorption. You aren't willing to give up the behavior that seems to work for you. Even if this is how you feel, Jesus speaks words of grace to you.

When we have experiences that are hard to put into words, it helps when someone can identify with them without needing you to explain them. You feel blessed, more hopeful, and less isolated. This is what the Lord does. As He invites us to turn to Him, He describes our experience. When we don't have the words, He speaks them for us and invites us to speak them with Him.

You find these words in the Psalms. If you read them, it will be like hearing your own soul speak.

- "Answer me when I call to You, O my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress; be merciful to me and hear my prayer." (Ps. 4:1)

Him rather than cry on our beds alone. The psalms teach us how to talk.

With this in mind, find a psalm to call your own, one that captures your experience and turns you to the Lord rather than to self-injury. Start with phrases or sections of the psalm to get started. Speak them from your heart to the Lord. Talk out loud. God is a real person: "Hear my cry for help, O Lord." Don't forget that these words are not simply those of a human poet expressing his sorrow or isolation. They are divinely authorized words that Jesus Himself used to call out to his Father. They teach us how to call out to the God who delights to hear us.

This is exactly what you need. All other paths loop back to yourself. It is as if you can't get away from you and your swirling emotions. The Psalms come down, describe and name these swirling emotions, then take us outside of ourselves and to the God who gives hope.

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## Do you notice that God actually wants us to speak to Him when we struggle, so much so that when we are speechless, He offers us words to speak.

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- "Give ear to my words, O Lord, consider my sighing. Listen to my cry for help, my King and my God, for to You I pray." (Ps. 5:1,2)
- "My soul is in anguish. How long, O Lord, how long?" (Ps. 6:3)
- "Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. The troubles of my heart have multiplied. Free me from my anguish. Look upon my affliction and my distress and take away all my sins." (Ps.25:17,18)
- "O God, You are my God, earnestly I seek You. My soul thirsts for You, my body longs for You, in a dry and weary land where there is no water." (Ps. 63:1)
- "Out of the depths I cry to You, O Lord. O Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy." (Ps.130:1)

Why did God include psalms in the Bible? Certainly, they teach us how to worship the Lord, but there is more. Do you notice that God actually wants us to speak to Him when we struggle, so much so that when we are speechless, He offers us words to speak? In one psalm after another, He invites us to cry out to

### *Words of Confession*

Once we are accustomed to calling out to the Lord, more words are available to us. Some of the most important are words of confession.

Confession of sin sometimes has a bad reputation. It evokes images of punishment, shame, and someone's anger against us. The reality is that we all sin every day, and conviction of sin is evidence that God's Spirit is working in our lives. Sin is against God, but an awareness of sin is a gift *from* God. So confession should be natural. What really makes it attractive, however, is that God promises mercy and forgiveness to all who confess their sin to Him (1 John 1:9).

The goal of confession is not to come up with a long list of individual sins. The goal is to confess that your sinful behavior and thoughts were *against* God. For example, selfishness is sin because life is not about us; it's about the glory of God. Gossip is sin because it speaks against people created in God's image, and it violates God's character: He is the author of love and speaks words that build up rather than tear

down. Everyone can acknowledge that they do wrong things sometimes. Many can admit they are sinners. But it is less common to remember that sin is against God. Scripture even says that the ordinary conflicts of life are actually evidence of hatred against God (James 4:4).

Our confessions might sound something like this: "Father, I confess that, in hurting myself, I ignore that You were wounded for me. I doubt Your promises, even though I know that You speak truth."

"Father, I confess that I prefer to turn inward than to turn to You. Forgive me. Yet I am so overwhelmed by the things I feel. Please help me."

"Father, I confess that I do this because I want to control rather than trust in your control."

The freedom to confess comes from knowing that, through Jesus Christ, "where sin increased, grace increased all the more" (Rom.

by important people. These can be deep hurts that self-injury can express. It can also be a way to punish ourselves for not being better than we are. Such self-injury is a way to hold onto the idea that we are unique.

Some of these struggles with shame can be responded to with simple wisdom. For example, if you want to hurt yourself because you did poorly on an exam, decide instead to learn from your mistakes, then ask for help and prepare well for the next one.

But if you feel that other people will be smarter no matter what you do, what are you saying about your relationship with God? Sometimes self-loathing is rooted in pride, although it certainly doesn't feel that way! On the surface, the problem seems to be just the opposite – that we need think better of ourselves. But if you search your heart for pride, it is usually there in some form.

In this case the pride is evident in the way

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## Even in our hardship, He is doing good. Sometimes the good is that He is teaching us to trust Him. It is a spiritual response with eternal value.

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5:20). No matter how much sin we discover in ourselves, there is more than enough grace and mercy to forgive and change us. God takes joy in forgiving us. It makes His name great to offer forgiveness that goes beyond anything in human relationships.

After confession, Scripture gives us more words to say. "If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness" (Ps.130:3). Be sure to end with thanks, not guilt! Thank you for loving me, even with this struggle."

### **Shame, Memories, and Victimization**

Forgiveness is our deepest need. It goes to the depths of the struggle with self-injury. But forgiveness doesn't always connect as clearly with the shame that can motivate self-injury.

**Failure.** Shame comes in several forms. Sometimes we feel like we haven't measured up to our own or others' ideals. We aren't pretty enough, we didn't achieve enough, we feel below average in everything, or we go unnoticed

we want more *for ourselves*. We want to be great in something. We want recognition, reputation – some kind of personal glory – and we aren't getting it. We want it more than we want God. We want to be a god rather than trust the true God.

What's the alternative? We confess what's going on and turn to the God whose glory and holiness leave us in awe, and whose humility leaves us with a different model of true humanness.

**Dashed Hopes and Rejection.** Another kind of shame comes when we have been rejected by someone significant. Perhaps a boyfriend sinned against you; perhaps you wanted a relationship that he didn't. Since rejection can trigger a compulsion to self-injure, this is a time to slow down. Call out to the Lord rather than cry on your bed. Face your doubts about God's plans for your life. Right now, it feels like misery, but if God sent Jesus to die so

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<sup>8</sup> Num. 14:17-19.

we could live, why would He be uncaring now? God's plans include hardship and disappointment, but He proved His love already in Jesus, and it is more sophisticated than we know. Even in our hardship, He is doing good. Sometimes the good is that He is teaching us to trust Him. It is a spiritual response with eternal value.

**Victimization.** A profound kind of shame comes when you have been physically or sexually violated. Betrayal is agonizing. The language of self-abuse has multiple layers, expressing anger, self-loathing, pain, guilt and self-punishment. With so much inside, victims feel like it is the only way to get temporary relief.

Victims can find words to express their pain in the Psalms. So often they are the cries of the innocent and oppressed. But God's words to the victimized go beyond the Psalms. The entire Bible speaks to those who have known injustice. You don't have to read far to find comfort and encouragement.

"Woe," the Lord says, "to the shepherds who only take care of themselves. You have ruled [my people] harshly and brutally. Therefore, I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock" (Ezek. 34:2-10). Then the Lord searches for His flock, rescues them, and leads them personally to rich pastures.

The prophet Isaiah anticipated a time when there would be no more shame. He addressed the women who suffered the most shame in his day. "Sing, O barren woman. Do not be afraid; you will not suffer shame. Do not fear disgrace; you will not be humiliated. You will forget the shame of your youth. For your Maker is your husband—the Lord Almighty is His name—the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer" (Isa. 54:1-6). In Christ, this time has come.

### ***The Road Leads to Jesus***

Isaiah points us to the true destination. Crying out to God, confessing sin, and trusting God's promises are critical steps that all lead to Jesus. Jesus is the focal point of Scripture, and true hope can be found when we pursue the same goal.

Isaiah could announce this blessing because he had prophetically witnessed the

sufferings and resurrection of Jesus (Isa. 53). He saw that Jesus would be rejected, shamed, victimized, and crushed for our sins so that His offspring could prosper. We are His offspring if we turn to Him.

We still have a tendency to draw a sharp distinction between the wrath of God and the love of Jesus. But Jesus is the full expression—"the exact representation" (Heb. 1:3)—of God's being. If we see and know Jesus, we see and know the Father—they are one. The cross reveals God's anger with sin *and* his love for His people. It reveals Jesus' humility to serve even to death *and* His greatness, power and exaltation in that death has no power over Him.

When you know Jesus you have found the better way that changes everything. Even when you know human love it affects your other relationships, your work and your recreation. In fact, if a potential marriage relationship does not change us for the better, it is probably wise to discontinue it.

Expect to be changed by a relationship with Jesus. When we don't change, then our attitude toward Him has more in common with a casual date than with a transforming marriage to someone who deeply loves you. What you are looking for is a relationship that gives you a new way to live.

- If you really believe that you have been loved by God, you will notice that you are more aware of others. You will begin to love others more deeply. You will notice that whereas you once needed the approval of others, you now need their approval less and you seek to love them more.
- If you know that you have been forgiven because of what Christ did rather than what you did, you will begin to release the debts of others. Instead of holding their sins against them you will forgive as you have been forgiven.
- If you know that you have received mercy, you will be quicker to confess your own sin. Not only will you begin to notice joy after confession, you will also notice that you are less apt to stand in judgment of others, because you know that your sins are at least as great as theirs.
- If you know that God has been generous in giving you Himself, you will find that you are

more generous with your time and money.

**A relationship with God means that your life is not simply your own.** Being people who want independence, this is more than you bargained for, but independence is not natural to the human condition. You have already tried it and seen its inadequacies. Not only that, you have found it impossible. You will always be dependent on something or someone - the love of one, the approval of another. You have been dependent on cutting to deal with run away emotions. All these dependencies lead to slavery. A relationship with God, through Jesus Christ, means that we have been set free from those things that held us captive (Gal.5:1).

### Action Steps

The gospel of Jesus Christ can sound good, but we resist it. We don't immediately like the idea that we belong to God. Independence has been the goal, not humble service and a relationship with strings attached. Our resistance becomes more apparent when we are asked to put faith into action. With this in mind, here are some practical suggestions that are examples of faith in action. If you are reluctant to implement them or others like them, they will expose your allegiances.

1. **Do you want to change?** The usual answer is "yes" and "no." Change is hard, in part because we don't want to change. Our behavior creates inconveniences, but it still serves a purpose in our lives. So ask this question regularly. It will remind you to confront your motivations and bring them to the Lord. It takes time to realize that the path with Jesus is better than the path of self-injury.

2. **Allow other people in.** Self-injury likes privacy, but God's path is one of light and openness. If you don't speak openly and honestly to someone you trust and who can help, it probably means that you aren't yet willing to change. Ask for help.

3. **Grow in honesty.** Lies come in many forms, from whoppers to silent cover-ups. Every day, think about how you have tried to hide your behavior. Confess these things to God and consider confessing to the person you misled. When lies pile up in relationships, we feel more shame, isolation and hopelessness. It is one of the Devil's favorite strategies.

4. **Feed yourself with Scripture.** Psalms, a Gospel and Ephesians are good places to start. Journaling can help you meditate on Scripture. Your goal is to be surprised by the character of God.

5. **Find good books that communicate clearly about God's grace.** Consider *The Cross Centered Life* by C.J. Mahaney, *Discipline of Grace* and *Transforming Grace* by Jerry Bridges.

6. **Anticipate situations.** Since your self-injury follows a pattern in which you can anticipate the situations, times and places when you are most vulnerable, what alternative plans can you make when those situations arise? Remember, you must choose these alternatives (calling a friend, reading at a public place) long before your emotions reach their crisis point.

7. **Search the Psalms to give voice to your heart.**

8. **Write out the meaning and purpose of your self-injury.** What are you saying by it?

9. **When you fail, don't give in to hopelessness.** All human beings sin and fail. It is what we do! But when we turn to Jesus and receive His Spirit, nothing is hopeless. We have forgiveness, deeper wisdom, and power to walk another path. If you are stuck in hopelessness, is it because you *want* to stay stuck?

10. **If you keep moving back into self-injury, notice how your behavior is more intentional than it seems.** You are doing what you want to do. If you are not learning from past self-abuse you don't want to change. For example, are you putting barriers between yourself and your self-abuse strategies?

11. **Now that you know God's mercy, you are free to consider the way you have sinned against other people.** Some of these people may be the very ones with whom you are angry. Don't weigh whose sin is worse. Instead, if you sinned, ask their forgiveness.

12. **Now that you love others more, find ways to show it.** How can you move towards others and help them? How can you give to someone else? God will help you become like Jesus. In particular, how can you help others who injure themselves, so they also can find freedom?

13. **Attend a church that worships Jesus Christ.** During the singing, notice how this is exactly what your own heart needs—to focus

outside yourself. You need to set your allegiance on Jesus rather than yourself. During the sermon, take note and make the connection between what is being said and your own heart.

**14. Pattern your personal reflections after the Psalms:** they are honest, not always pretty, yet consistently end with praise and

thanks. If you can find time daily to honestly praise God for who He is and thank Him for what He has done in Jesus, you are definitely on the right path. And it the direction of your path more than how perfect you are on it that makes the difference.