

Biblical Solutions for Life Issues

Topic 47 – Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

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Introduction

The Scriptures tell us that all people will experience trouble in their lives.

⁷For man is born for trouble, As sparks fly upward. Job 5:7

¹⁴“Man, who is born of woman, Is short-lived and full of turmoil. Job 14:1

Suffering entered the world at the Fall (Gen 3). This is where all of creation, including people, were corrupted by sin.

²⁰**For the creation was subjected to futility**, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²²For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. Rom 8:20-22

¹²Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so **death spread to all men, because all sinned** Rom 5:12

General suffering is a result of sin entering the world either by corrupted creation (disease, disaster, etc.) or as a recipient of a sinful action of another person (assault, murder, etc.). This is difficulty or hardship that comes on a person through no fault of their own (see topics 15, 16, and 17 for an understanding of how the believer can glorify God during trials and suffering).

Even so, God is sovereign over all suffering and in His sovereignty, love, and wisdom He works ALL things for His glory and our good (Rom 8:28). God calls believers who are experiencing suffering to rejoice (James 1:2-4; 1 Pet 1:6-8) and persevere (Rom 5:3-4). A believer who is suffering may never experience relief from that suffering this side of heaven. However, they have an incredible opportunity to present the truth of the Gospel to the world (to prove their faith): Jesus Christ is true and He has done a supernatural work in their heart. That is the issue – the heart motives and resulting actions through the trial and suffering.

What about those who have experienced severe trauma? For example:

- being in a devastating auto crash that leaves loved ones or yourself maimed or dead.
- experiencing or witnessing a violent crime (murder, mass murder, rape, assault, etc.)
- being a first responder who experiences the aftermaths of a life threatening/taking event.
- experiencing a natural disaster.
- Soldiers, Sailors, Marines experience combat, combat deaths, or combat injuries.

These traumatic events can lead to significant stress in the people involved resulting in physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual responses. People tend to respond to these traumatic situations in similar ways to varying degrees. Psychologists label severe responses to such events “Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome” or PTSD. Today, let’s look how God cares for and how Scripture addresses these situations.

PTSD Described

In traumatic, highly stressful situations, people respond similarly and in expected ways. When the adrenalin rush caused by the trauma fades a person may experience lingering physical, mental, and emotional effects as the impact of the trauma is more understood. These responses to the trauma may last days or months depending on the severity of the trauma and a person’s coping ability.

In extreme responses to trauma, a person may be unable to use the usual coping mechanisms and signs of significant distress appear. This is PTSD. It describes people who have experienced a very painful event and are stuck in that moment of past pain—its severity never fades.

The DSM-V defines the diagnostic criteria for PTSD. In summary:

- A. Exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence in one (or more) of the following ways:
 - 1. Directly experiencing the traumatic event(s).
 - 2. Witnessing, in person, the event(s) as it occurred to others.
 - 3. Learning that the traumatic event(s) occurred to a close family member or close friend.
 - 4. Experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic events (e.g., first responders collecting human remains; police officers repeatedly exposed to details of child abuse). This is not exposure through media, TV, movies, or pictures.
- B. Presence of one (or more) of the following intrusion symptoms associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning after the traumatic event(s) occurred:
 - 1. Recurrent, involuntary, and intrusive distressing memories of the traumatic event(s)
 - 2. Recurrent distressing dreams in which the content and/or affect of the dream are related to the traumatic event(s)
 - 3. Dissociative reactions (e.g., flashbacks) in which the individual feels or acts as if the traumatic event(s) were recurring. (Such reactions may occur on a continuum, with the most extreme expression being a complete loss of awareness of present surroundings.)
 - 4. Intense or prolonged psychological distress at exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event(s)
 - 5. Marked physiological reactions to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event(s).
- C. Persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning after the traumatic event(s) occurred, as evidenced by one or both of the following
 - 1. Avoidance of or efforts to avoid distressing memories, thoughts, or feelings about or closely associated with the traumatic event(s)
 - 2. Avoidance of or efforts to avoid external reminders (people, places, conversations, activities, objects, situations) that arouse distressing memories, thoughts, or feelings about or closely associated with the traumatic event(s).
- D. Negative alterations in cognitions and mood associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning or worsening after the traumatic event(s) occurred, as evidenced by two (or more) of the following:
 - 1. Inability to remember an important aspect of the traumatic event(s) (typically due to dissociative amnesia and not to other factors such as head injury, alcohol, or drugs).
 - 2. Persistent and exaggerated negative beliefs or expectations about oneself, others, or the world (e.g., “I am bad,” “No one can be trusted,” “The world is completely dangerous,” “My whole nervous system is permanently ruined”).
 - 3. Persistent, distorted cognitions about the cause or consequences of the traumatic event(s) that lead the individual to blame himself/herself or others.
 - 4. Persistent negative emotional state (e.g., fear, horror, anger, guilt, or shame).
 - 5. Markedly diminished interest or participation in significant activities.
 - 6. Feelings of detachment or estrangement from others.
 - 7. Persistent inability to experience positive emotions (e.g., inability to experience happiness, satisfaction, or loving feelings).

- E. Marked alterations in arousal and reactivity associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning or worsening after the traumatic event(s) occurred, as evidenced by two (or more) of the following:
 1. Irritable behavior and angry outbursts (with little or no provocation) typically expressed as verbal or physical aggression toward people or objects.
 2. Reckless or self-destructive behavior.
 3. Hypervigilance.
 4. Exaggerated startle response.
 5. Problems with concentration.
 6. Sleep disturbance (e.g., difficulty falling or staying asleep or restless sleep).
- F. Duration of the disturbance (Criteria B, C, D, and E) is more than 1 month.
- G. The disturbance causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.
- H. The disturbance is not attributable to the physiological effects of a substance (e.g., medication, alcohol) or another medical condition.

An estimated 80% of Americans will experience traumatic events in their life with accompanying distress. About 10% of the 80% will develop a more extreme version of distress reaction.

Some researchers theorize that the trauma causes changes in how the brain works. However, there appears to be no pathology associated with PTSD, therefore the medical cause is uncertain. A compounding issue, particularly with those who have experienced combat, is Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) due to physical head trauma.

From a purely medical perspective, psychotropic medications have been used with minimal success. Other treatments include various forms of talk therapy as well as training on how to react to memories and feelings.

Universally, it is important to avoid isolation, continue life activities like work and caring for other people, and avoid alcohol and recreational drugs.

A Biblical Example

Are there any Biblical examples of people who may have experienced PTSD? The apostle Paul may qualify. In AD 33, Paul, then Saul, was involved with the stoning of Stephen and then began persecuting the church.

⁵⁸When they had driven him out of the city, they *began* stoning *him*; and **the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul.** ⁵⁹They went on stoning Stephen as he called on *the Lord* and said, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” ⁶⁰Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” Having said this, he fell asleep. Acts 7:58-60

³But **Saul *began* ravaging the church**, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison. Acts 8:3

¹Now **Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord**, went to the high priest, ²and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Acts 9:1-2

Paul's own words are recorded in Acts regarding his persecution years. These defenses occurred in 57-60 AD, nearly 30 years after the stoning of Stephen and other murders occurred:

⁴**I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons,**
⁵as also the high priest and all the Council of the elders can testify. From them I also received letters to the brethren, and started off for Damascus in order to bring even those who were there to Jerusalem as prisoners to be punished. Acts 22:4-5 (Paul's defense before the Jews in Jerusalem)

⁹“So then, I thought to myself that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰And this is just what I did in Jerusalem; not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, **but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them.** ¹¹And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme; and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities. Acts 26:9-11 (Paul's defense before Agrippa)

To Timothy in 62 AD, Paul writes:

¹²I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service, ¹³even **though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy** because I acted ignorantly in unbelief; ¹⁴and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are *found* in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that **Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all.** ¹⁶Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life. ¹⁷Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, *be* honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. 1 Tim 1:12-17

Finally, in Philippians (written in AD 60), Paul writes:

⁶as to zeal, **a persecutor of the church;** as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless. Phil 3:6

The word for “persecutor” here means to pursue with repeated acts of enmity. Most interesting is the tense of the word, it is in the present tense. One commentator writes, “The memory of it continually haunts him; ... as if the action were before his eyes at the time of writing.”

In addition to the acts of persecution that he was responsible for, Paul was the recipient of violence.

²³Are they servants of Christ?—I speak as if insane—I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. ²⁴Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine *lashes*. ²⁵**Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep.** ²⁶*I have been* on frequent journeys, **in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren;** ²⁷*I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. ²⁸Apart from *such* external things, there is the daily pressure on me *of* concern for all the churches. 2 Cor 11:23-28*

¹⁹But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. Acts 14:19 (at Lystra)

²²The crowd rose up together against them, and the chief magistrates tore their robes off them and proceeded to order *them* to be beaten with rods. ²³When they had struck them with many blows, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to guard them securely; Acts 16:22-23 (Paul and Silas in Philippi)

Referring to this violence and the emotional aftermath, Paul says:

⁸For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of **our affliction which came to us in Asia**, that **we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life**; ⁹indeed, **we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead**; ¹⁰who delivered us from so great a *peril of death*, and will deliver *us*, He on whom we have set our hope. And He will yet deliver us, ¹¹you also joining in helping us through your prayers, so that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the favor bestowed on us through *the prayers of many*. 2 Cor 1:8-11

“Affliction” means extreme pressure, not minor inconveniences, but real hardships. Most often it is used of outward difficulties, but is also used of emotional stress.

“Burdened excessively” means weighted, unbearably crushed to the point of depression.

“Beyond our strength” means beyond what he was capable of handling. It was even beyond Paul’s formidable physical and character capacity to handle.

“Despaired even of life” means “no passage”, “no exit”, “without a way”. At some point Paul had the tunnel vision of hopelessness and helplessness.

“Indeed” is emphatic with powerful emotion.

“Sentence of death within ourselves” not just despairing of life, but believing that death was eminent. The tense here is that he continues to feel it at the time of writing.

So, there was trauma and memories of the event(s), but Paul was not impaired. He did not forget the pain, but he also did not remain in the moment of that past pain. As we look at the book of 2 Corinthians, we can see many principles God used in Paul’s life to avoid the debilitating effects of trauma.

1. Recognize that God is the God of all comfort

³Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴**who comforts us in all our affliction** so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. ⁵For **just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ**. 2 Cor 1:3-5

❖ **Where do you go for comfort?**

2. Understand the purpose of sufferings and do not trust in yourself, trust in God.

⁹indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves **so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead**; 2 Cor 1:9

❖ **Where is your trust?**

3. Set your hope on God

¹⁰who delivered us from so great a *peril of death*, and will deliver *us*, **He on whom we have set our hope**. And He will yet deliver us, 2 Cor 1:10

❖ **On what/whom have you set your hope?**

4. Take power from your relationship with God

⁷But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, **so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves**; ⁸*we are* afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; ⁹persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰**always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.** 2 Cor 4:7-10

❖ **Do you allow Christ's life to consistently flow through you?**

5. Have hope and focus on eternal things because God is at work in you for eternity

¹⁶**Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day.** ¹⁷For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, ¹⁸while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal. 2 Cor 4:16-18

❖ **Where is your focus?**

6. Commit yourself to be pleasing to God.

⁹Therefore **we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him.** ¹⁰For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. 2 Cor 5:9-10

❖ **Are you committed to pleasing God?**

7. Focus on your mission of making disciples.

²⁰Therefore, **we are ambassadors for Christ**, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 2 Cor 5:20

❖ **Are you involved in God's mission?**

8. Look for God's work and rejoice in it.

¹³For this reason we have been comforted. And besides our comfort, **we rejoiced even much more for the joy of Titus, because his spirit has been refreshed by you all.** 2 Cor 7:13

¹⁶But **thanks be to God** who puts the same earnestness on your behalf in the heart of Titus. 2 Cor 8:16

❖ **Do you purpose to look for God's work around you?**

9. Take your thoughts captive.

³For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, ⁴for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. ⁵**We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ,** 2 Cor 10:3-5

❖ **Do you use the Philippians 4:8 principle with your thoughts?**

10. Understand that God provides you enabling grace.

⁸Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. ⁹And He has said to me, “**My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.**” **Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.** ¹⁰Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong. 2 Cor 12:8-10

❖ **Are you relying on God’s grace as you move in obedience to Him? Do you go before Him to ask for mercy and grace to help in your time of need (Heb 4:16)?**

11. Ensure you pass the test.

⁵Test yourselves *to see* if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you—unless indeed you fail the test? 2 Cor 13:5

❖ **Are you connected to Christ?**

12. Rejoice, pursue growth, be comforted, seek fellowship.

¹¹Finally, brethren, rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like-minded, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. 2 Cor 13:11

❖ **Are you seeking fellowship with God’s people?**

General Biblical principles to address PTSD.

1. Make a decision of the will that your highest purpose is to glorify God. Your desire to glorify God must be your greatest desire, your highest purpose, more important than anything.

To glorify God is to show His character in our motives, thoughts, words, and deeds. We purpose to make choices that honor God in obedience. We glorify God when we live in a way that those around us can see God’s character in us (Ex 33:17-23); when we display the life of Christ living through us (Gal 2:20).

³¹Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever **you do, do all to the glory of God.** 1 Cor 10:31

²⁰I have been crucified with Christ; and **it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me;** and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me. Gal 2:20

2. Strive to walk in the Spirit (“above the line”).

¹⁶But I say, **walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.** ... ²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, *faithfulness*, ²³gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. Gal 5:16, 22-23

Living a consistently God-glorifying life is possible only through Spirit-filling. The Christian life is not lived in the believer’s own strength. It is a life lived filled with the Spirit as the life of Christ flows through us.

When a believer is submitted to God (Eph 5:18-6:9) and His Word (Col 3:16-4:1), the indwelling Holy Spirit fills (or controls) them and produces Christ-like character, heart motives, attitudes, words, and reactions. The believer in a right relationship with God will be filled with the Spirit. This is the usual, expected state of a believer.

As we bow before God in complete submission, we will be filled with the Spirit and exhibit the fruits of the Spirit. If we find ourselves sinning and therefore bowed before a master other than the Lord, then we must repent and bow again before the Lord. As we repent and once again bow before the Lord as master, we will be filled with the Spirit and the life of Christ will flow through us. We will have the power to live a God-glorifying life and exhibit the fruits of the Spirit.

3. Be actively involved in a local body.

²³Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; ²⁴and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, ²⁵not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging *one another*; and all the more as you see the day drawing near. Heb 10:23-25

Believers are united in Christ and connected to one another. The body figure illustrates the diverse unity and interdependence that is present in the church. The body is made up of unique individuals who are united by the indwelling Holy Spirit. God has designed the church in such a way so that care can be brought to believers. The local body is the major way that God brings love, edification, encouragement, admonition, and comfort to believers.

Concluding Thoughts

Everyone will experience difficulty in life. Some will experience significant trauma which can impact them greatly. In the midst of this trauma, God provides grace to be able to glorify Him even in the aftermath of trauma. God provides the resources to honor him through the indwelling Holy Spirit, His powerful Word, and His people.

Real Life Scenarios

Yourself #1: You have experienced trauma (combat death or injury or violent crime). You find that you have intrusive, distressing memories of the event. Sometimes it is as if you are there again. You dream about the event. You feel like you are alone and without purpose. You are hyper-vigilant and react to non-threatening events with out of proportion responses. You are afraid, angry, feel guilt, and are depressed. Your relationships are struggling. What precepts, principles, and promises from today's study can be encouraging to you?

Someone Else #1: A friend was a witness to a brutal attack by two men on another man. The two men were turning on your friend when bystanders arrived and scared off the attackers. Your friend has flashbacks to the event, sleep disturbances, and persistent negative emotions including worry that the attackers are coming to get him/her. His/her family relationships are beginning to suffer. In thinking about bringing Biblical care to your friend, what is the first thing you need to know? How might you begin to care for him/her? What precepts, principles, and promises from today's study can be encouraging to him/her?

Biblical Solutions for Life Issues
Topic 47 – Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder – Additional Study

Read Psalm 31. What is true about God; about you? What are ways that God cares for the afflicted?

Read Psalm 34. What is true about God; about you? What are ways that God cares for the afflicted?

Read Psalm 46. What is true about God; about you? What are ways that God cares for the afflicted?

Read Psalm 56. What is true about God; about you? What are ways that God cares for the afflicted?

Read Hebrews 4:16. List out your needs regarding the difficulties you are going through. Spend time praying about each of these, seeking mercy and grace from God.