

The Victim Trap

On April 20, 2010 an oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico called Deepwater Horizon exploded into flames. British Petroleum (BP), owner of the well, failed repeatedly in the next five months to stop the massive underwater oil leak. The well was finally capped in September. Eleven people died, and more oil was dumped into the environment than from any other oil spill in history.

During the course of efforts to contain the oil and do cleanup, the head of BP came to the U.S. from London. He was apparently greatly inconvenienced by all this, and at one point uttered what is now his infamous cry: “I want my life back!”

His self-preoccupation gained worldwide media coverage, but this attitude was apparently not an isolated incident in his life. Time magazine reported later that at a meeting with his executives regarding the crisis, he also exclaimed “What did we do to deserve this?!”

Poor man, Chief Executive of one of the largest corporations on the planet, a victim of ... well.... of *something!* (When this CEO later resigned, his severance package was reported to be worth \$18 million.)

The victim stance has become a handy go-to in our public culture as a rationalization for not being responsible. Everybody’s doing it. Victim language is widely used today for political and personal manipulation. The media seeds, waters, and cultivates it for profit. (It attracts audiences.)

Its overuse these days is unfortunate because, for real, struggling individuals, it ends up being a dead-end, a trap. There are true victims—most of us have been victims of something—some have been victims of horrendous things. But what is popular can blind us to reality. I cannot solve my problems, or grow as a person, if I see myself as basically powerless and helpless in a world of overwhelming circumstances. And a life of chronic blaming leaves a person miserable.

I’ve helped adults recover from childhood abuse and neglect which can only be described as “crimes against humanity.” The healing can take years of grueling work and God’s power, love, and grace. This “miracle in slow motion” is greatly aided by a community of support; but still, to get better the individual must take ownership of the problem.

Often the perpetrators of such abuse are no longer around, or are deceased. It would be impracticable or impossible for the victims to see justice done as a prerequisite of their own recovery. Getting free—of most wounds in our past—begins with this realization. If I make my life progress dependent on what someone from my past does or doesn’t do, I’m powerless all over again. Giving truthful testimony to the facts of the past is important, as well as efforts to stop future crimes, but making justice happen is God’s purview. He *will* bring justice, in His timing, more perfectly and appropriately than we can imagine.

There is a source of hope, however, which is not dependent on what “the other person” does. Often I see, in experiences which would have extinguished the

motivation and hope from most adults, let alone children, a spark of something literally miraculous. I see a passion to “get better” that is hard to account for if we’re only a product of our life histories. If life is progress by adaptation, the people I’m thinking of refused to adapt. What I see is a combination of God’s design of a person *in His image*, and the *faith* He gave to the person as a child, even before that person knew God by name. Faith that somewhere, against all odds, there is something better: real love and life. Children have a designed-in nature which resists and recoils from evil—like God—even when they’re being “taught” that evil is normal.

But this paper is about the trap of getting stuck in a victim mentality. If, having been victimized, I insist that my victimizer apologize and make reparations to me before my life will get better, I may live the rest of my life paralyzed by that demand. I can move forward only if the other person does the right thing. I’ve given power over my life to the very person or entity I want to be free from.

Because of the confusion and conflicting messages in this fallen world, many people grow up with an unresolved question: “Who am I?” I’ve struggled with that question myself.

One thing is certain: “victim” is not my identity.

A key outcome of recovery from old wounds and life-warping neglect and lies, is finding one’s true identity. Am I really only a victim? Or is there more? Who was I created to be? Graciously, God suspends the full impact of evil actions, to give us enough time, and enough sanity, to discover the answer to those questions. A child in normal circumstances begins finding his identity in his mother’s face, as she shows love and delight in his existence. Sadly, this doesn’t happen for everyone. But we can find our true identity by looking into the face of the One who created us. “...a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.” (from Zephaniah 3:17)

“In November 2012, BP and the United States Department of Justice settled federal criminal charges with BP pleading guilty to 11 counts of manslaughter, two misdemeanors, and a felony count of lying to Congress.” Investigation revealed short-cuts in construction and lack of QA likely caused the well failure. The reparation penalties for victims and environmental cleanup was in the several billions of dollars. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deepwater_Horizon]

Was justice done in the case of the Deepwater Horizon disaster? Were the problems with underwater oil wells fixed so that they’re all safer now? Most of us have no way of knowing. At best, like all justice administered by human beings, it was imperfect. The only perfect judge is God. And in our own personal lives, we often yearn passionately to see injustices corrected. I get very angry sometimes seeing how

many people are apparently “getting away with it.” But, at the same time, I’m aware of the mysterious good fortune that I’ve received more grace than judgement from God during my life.

So, whether we’re among the big players in this world “managing liability,” or we’re more average people just trying to manage daily life, staying in the victim mode doesn’t get any problems solved.

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” It is God’s joy to bring something out of nothing. That quote on faith comes from the beginning of chapter 11 of the book of Hebrews. (You should read or reread it.) That chapter is chock full of mini-bio’s of people who were “victims.” But the bible doesn’t call them victims. Their faith is held up as exemplary. Popular culture thrives on things we can see. But faith is about bigger, more important things. Far from leaving us as victims, Jesus is passionate about producing victors, like Him.

Psalm 27 encourages us. Here are excerpts from it:

The Lord is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?
When evildoers assail me
to eat up my flesh,
my adversaries and foes,
it is they who stumble and fall.

For he will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;

You have said, “Seek my face.”
My heart says to you,
“Your face, Lord, do I seek.”

For my father and my mother have forsaken me,
but the Lord will take me in.
I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the Lord
in the land of the living!
Wait for the Lord;
be strong, and let your heart take courage;
wait for the Lord!

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