

Title: Deadly Perils of the Victim Swamp: Bitterness, Self Pity, Entitlement, and Embellishment

Greetings all,

We have just posted a new document on the “victim swamp.” Note that this is material we are in the middle of learning about, so we welcome comments in response to this first “Beta testing” document.

Note: this document has been revised/improved many times since 2001. See the “Special Subjects/Advanced topics page of www.immanuelapproach.com for the most current version.

Blessings,

Dr. Lehman/Karl

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**Deadly Perils of the Victim Swamp:
Bitterness, Self Pity, Entitlement, and Embellishment**
(Revised 8/3/2001)

I. Introduction

Once the enemy has managed to bring about trauma in a person’s life and to plant lies in the traumatic memories, his next priority is to prevent the wound from being healed. If a person “stands straight”¹ in the pain of being wounded as a victim, he is in a good place to receive healing. The pain motivates him to seek healing, and “standing straight” in the pain is a spiritual and emotional position “open” to the Lord’s healing work. The enemy knows that he can prevent healing by luring a victim away from standing straight in his pain, and into the swamp of bitterness, self pity, entitlement, and embellishment. He knows that once he has lured us into this victim swamp, our own bitterness, self pity, entitlement, and embellishment will hinder any attempt to heal the original wounds. To return to the place where we can receive healing, we must confess and renounce these sinful patterns of thought and behavior, and then ask the Lord to free us from them.

Note: We use “victim” to refer to victims of intentionally hurtful perpetrators and/or to

¹We heard this phrase from healing minister and author Leanne Payne, at one of her Pastoral Care Ministries Schools. We could not find a specific reference to it in her writings, and do not recall if she was quoting someone else, or if the term was original to her.

victims of non-perpetrator traumatic events (accidents, natural disasters, etc).² Despite the feelings commonly associated with it, there is nothing inherently shameful about being a victim³. It is not a character flaw to have been victimized – it is something we all experience at one time or another as a part of living in this fallen world. The problem begins when we get stuck in “victimhood.” We slide into the victim swamp when we begin to take on “victimhood” as an identity, when we do things (like bitterness, self pity, entitlement, and embellishment) that prevent us from healing and moving on, that keep us stuck in the place of being a wounded victim.

II. Bitterness

The sins of the victim swamp have so much seductive power because they offer so many apparent benefits. It often feels like bitterness/anger helps me defend myself. As described in “Bitterness as Clutter that can Hinder Theophostic Ministry,” bitterness/planning for revenge gave me the feeling that I wasn’t just a totally powerless victim – like there was something I could do and that there would be justice some day.

Almost everybody recognizes bitterness as a deadly peril of the victim swamp. Many books have already been written about bitterness and forgiveness. Most books on prayer for emotional healing list bitterness as a common hindrance to healing. See Dr. Smith’s section on “revengeful emotions” ([Beyond Tolerable Recovery](#), pp 93-96), his chapter on forgiveness ([Beyond Tolerable Recovery](#), pp 239-250), and “Bitterness as Clutter that can Hinder Theophostic Ministry” on the Ministry Aids page of our web site, for resources that directly discuss the place of bitterness and forgiveness in Theophostic ministry.

III. Self Pity

Self pity lurks in some corner of every heart, turning us inward, yet ironically, away from our true selves. It provides a strange form of comfort, even though it prevents real healing. I think we are all familiar with “feeling sorry for ourselves,” and the way it “feels good,” even as it blocks true healing and real solutions. This feeling is qualitatively different than that of honestly acknowledging one’s pain. Self pity feels that “I have suffered far more and worse than others. I cannot possibly go on until somebody (God, the perpetrator, “somebody who ought to be in charge of these things”) gives me a different life/undoes what happened.” Standing straight in one’s pain, by contrast, is to simply and humbly acknowledge, “I hurt – I feel _____ (*rejected, ashamed, scared, etc*). This thing happened to me, and I was wounded. This pain is part of the brokenness of the world which has affected me. I accept that this suffering has been part of my life, and I now want to let it go by the grace of God, and go on

²An interesting observation: When I am wounded by non-perpetrator traumatic events, I often see myself as a “victim” of God’s negligence.

³*Lie-based* shame is a very common part of the subjective experience of being a victim.

with my life.”

Some people mistake denial of their pain as the avoidance of self pity. Denial says, “Other people had it worse, so I don’t/shouldn’t feel so bad,” or “That event didn’t hurt me; the past is the past, and I’ve gone on with my life (but the evidence of the person’s life shows that he still has lies rooted in that past event).”

My experience with self pity has been very similar to my experience with bitterness. I can recognize it, confess it, repent of it, and renounce it, but I cannot free myself. However, whenever I pray the sample prayers below, acknowledging my helplessness and asking the Lord to free me, I experience immediate and dramatic relief.

IV. Entitlement

Victim entitlement tells us that we have the “right” to avoid responsibilities and consequences we don’t want, and the “right” to take things we do want: “I shouldn’t have to carry the same kind of responsibilities others are expected to carry because my life has been so hard,” “I have the right to act this way (*angry, violent, rude, unfaithful, etc.*) because of the things that were done to me,” “It’s okay for me to take this _____ because of all the things that were taken from me.”

The sad truth is that we *are* “entitled” (have the right) to stay wounded, bitter, and miserable. Amazingly, the enemy often succeeds in convincing us to do this. We are also entitled to healing if we choose to release bitterness and self pity, and to embrace the Lord’s plan for healing.

V. Embellishment

People often feel that the true source of their pain will not be recognized as valid by others, so they exaggerate their suffering in other events to ensure that their pain will be acknowledged somewhere. We sometimes think of this phenomenon as “(real) pain in search of a story.” Our experience is that the traumatic memories that are the true source of pain are often repressed/dissociated/unrecognized to the point that the person receiving ministry is not consciously aware of them. Both the fear that the pain in these memories will not be validated, and the exaggeration of suffering in other events, are often subconscious. The problem with this phenomena is not that the person is trying to express his/her pain, but that letting the pressure out somewhere else makes it easier to continue hiding the true source of the pain. If we want permanent healing, we need to find and feel the deeper wound that is the true source of the pain. If we recognize and then release embellishment, the pain will stay where it belongs and the deeper wounds will be easier to find.

Embellishment provides a short term comfort similar to what we experience with self pity, even as it stands in the way of healing and growth. Both Charlotte and I have caught ourselves indulging in fantasies in which real difficulties in our lives have been embellished into tragic

melodrama. Somehow the suffering and indignities we face seem to hurt less if we imagine them to be heroic instead of walking in the truth that we all face difficulties and challenges, and that the Lord is with each of us as we face the portion of suffering He has allowed to come our way. Embellishment is also “valuable” as an accomplice that increases the “leverage” for bitterness, self pity, and entitlement.

Common clues to the presence of embellishment (and self-pity) are statements that include “always,” “everybody,” “never,” and/or “nobody.” For example, “I *always* get the short end of the stick,” “*Everybody* else got more than me,” “God is *never* there for me when I really need Him” or “*Nobody* ever notices my pain.” These words do not always indicate self pity or embellishment (for example, some people with profound rejection wounds have extreme core lies such as “*Nobody* loves me – I am unlovable”), but it is wise to keep in mind self pity and embellishment if the person receiving ministry makes “always/never” all-inclusive statements.

VI. Miscellaneous comments

Both self pity and entitlement get in the way of seeing and taking responsibility for our own sins. Unfortunately, this means that the more self pity and entitlement a person has, the harder it is for them to see. The problem is *everybody else's* fault! How could you *possibly* be suggesting that there is something they need to be doing differently? People who are the most severely infected by the victim swamp sins usually get very angry with me when I suggest that bitterness, self pity, etc. may be getting in the way of their healing. However, I have been pleasantly surprised by how many are eventually able to acknowledge this painful truth, go through the sample prayers and commands, and then move on with their healing.

Both Charlotte and I have been sobered by how tempting it is to insist on what feels “fair,” even if it means staying in the victim swamp. This has been especially true when it comes to conflict in our marriage – “I shouldn’t have to pray the victim swamp prayers when Charlotte hasn’t even yet!” We have learned to challenge ourselves with the motto “Do what’s right, not what’s fair.”

Bitterness, self pity, entitlement, and embellishment seem especially common in our relationship with the Lord. “I have been praying and praying for healing – if He wants me to get better, then why doesn’t He come down here and do something about it? I am perfectly willing to do my healing work, why doesn’t He just give me a break? I have the right to be _____ (angry, bitter, depressed, irritable, demanding, etc.) because God *never* takes care of me, things *always* go wrong.” When I am in the victim swamp, statements like these feel so reasonable, so true. I usually have to choose to go through the prayers by an act of will. I have begun prayers to confess and release the victim swamp sins with preambles such as: “I really don’t feel like saying this prayer at all. What I would really feel like saying is ‘Come down here and take care of Your children – come down here and do Your #\$\$%&@ job!’ The only reason I am saying these prayers is that I know (in my head) that this bitterness and self pity is a dead end street, I know (in my head) that it is blocking my healing, and I know I can’t get free by myself (this is usually the only part that *feels* true).” Amazingly, the Lord is very

gracious, and answers even these outrageous prayers.

VII. Practical comments

Self pity seems to be an especially humbling sin to see and acknowledge in oneself, and entitlement and embellishment aren't much easier. My usual spontaneous reaction, when Charlotte suggests that the wound we are working on may be infected by self pity, is to feel angry at her. I often feel defensive, like I have been "caught" doing something wrong. I also usually feel invalidated – like she is blaming me for the problem instead of recognizing how I was wounded by others. "How *dare* you imply that I am doing something wrong? Can't you see that I am the one that got hurt?" It is important to realize that this material is a bitter pill, so that we can be helpful instead of judgmental when the person receiving ministry finds it hard to swallow. We would like to offer the following thoughts about how to help the person receiving ministry see and release these sinful patterns of thought and behavior.

- The best possible scenario is that the person receiving ministry identifies the problem and asks for help: "I think maybe I have a problem with self pity – maybe it gets in the way of my healing. Could we do some kind of prayer for this?" This seldom happens, but we are hoping that it will become more common as good material regarding the victim swamp sins gets written and published.
- Lead by example. Most of us tend to be gifted at seeing the victim swamp sins in others, and handicapped when it comes to seeing them in ourselves (Charlotte and I have certainly experienced this in our relationship). One of the most important things that we can do is to lead by example. I usually start comments about the victim swamp by sharing about my own experience of being stuck in it. Please ask the Lord to reveal these sins in your own life, and go through these prayers for yourself, before using this document to help everybody else see their victim swamp sins.
- Be non-judgmental. It is very important to be free of judgment towards the person receiving ministry. My "judgment scanners" immediately go to maximum sensitivity when Charlotte suggests any of the victim swamp sins. Any judgment present is detected immediately, and makes it much more difficult for me to receive the truth of her concerns. If we are feeling angry and/or judgmental – frustrated at the person receiving ministry because his self pity is blocking the way, like we want to "hit" the person receiving ministry with this essay to make him see his victim swamp sins – then we need to deal with our judgment and triggering before discussing the victim swamp with the person receiving ministry. This is another good reason to address the victim swamp sins in ourselves first – discovering these sins in ourselves will help us be less judgmental towards others.
- Be non-anxious. Most people display some anger when I suggest that self pity, and/or entitlement, and/or embellishment may be hindering their work. It was very difficult for me to bring up the possibility of these victim swamp sins until I dealt with my

triggers and fears about people getting angry with me. I would encourage you to look carefully for triggers regarding conflict/anger if you experience anxiety when suggesting the possibility of victim swamp sins.

- Point out faulty “either or” logic. My “How *dare* you imply that I am doing something wrong? Can’t you see that I am the one that got hurt?” reaction stands on faulty “either or” logic. **Either** you validate that I was wounded as an innocent victim **or** you say that my victim swamps sins are hindering the healing process. In reality, **both** of these statements are usually true. I was wounded as an innocent victim, and that needs to be acknowledged and validated, **and** my current bitterness, self pity, etc. are hindering the healing process.
- Address guardian lies. I think angry reactions in the person receiving ministry often come from underlying core lies/guardian lies, and it is especially helpful to identify these and submit them to the Lord. As always, truth directly from Jesus is more effective at addressing lies than logical insight from the therapist/minister, especially if the guardian lie is experientially anchored in childhood memories. For example, my intense angry reaction: “How *dare* you imply that I am doing something wrong? Can’t you see that I am the one that got hurt?” was an expression of the underlying lie “I am being blamed/discredited/invalidated – the sins against me aren’t being acknowledged,” and went back to memories of being a white kid in the 1960's in a liberal, mixed-race grade-school. The general philosophy was that white people were responsible for all the problems in the world, and that oppressed minorities were always the innocent victims. On my playground, this translated into the core lie: “I will be/am being blamed, discredited, invalidated – the sins against me won’t be/aren’t being acknowledged.” It was somewhat helpful for my adult mind to see the faulty logic in my angry reaction, but it was much more valuable to identify and address the underlying guardian lie. “I will be blamed/discredited/invalidated” is such a common component of people’s original victim experience that it is probably wise to check for this lie whenever the person receiving ministry experiences an angry response to the suggestion of victim swamp sins.

As mentioned above, the sins of the victim swamp have so much seductive power because they offer so many apparent benefits. We perceive these apparent benefits to be a form of guardian lies – in one way or another, they are lie-based reasons not to move forward with the healing work. Especially look for these apparent benefit guardian lies if the person receiving ministry is experiencing ambivalence about confessing and releasing the victim swamp sins. Help the person focus these apparent benefits as guardian lies, and then hold them up to the Lord for inspection.

Be especially thorough the first time through: The first time someone deals with the victim swamp sins, we encourage including all the optional sample prayers and commands. We also look for generational patterns, and go through the prayer for generational sins, strongholds, spirits, and curses if there are others in the family tree

with these victim swamp sins.

More than one location: Like bitterness, vows, and demonic infection, the sins of the victim swamp can be attached to a number of different groups of traumatic memories. They can also be carried by a number of different internal parts. You will need to deal with these victim swamp sins each time you deal with internal parts and/or traumatic memories that are contaminated by bitterness, self pity, entitlement, and embellishment.

Ask the person receiving ministry if he really wants to release bitterness, self pity, entitlement, and embellishment: Never assume the person is ready or willing to be free, especially since these sins usually come with so much secondary gain. Always ask if he/she wants to be free from this bitterness, self pity, entitlement, and embellishment. Ask again: "ARE YOU SURE?" If there is any sense of uncertainty or lack of internal unity regarding letting go of the bitterness, self pity, entitlement, and embellishment, look for one or more of the "common problems" discussed below.

If it doesn't work: Test again for the "common problems" if the bitterness, self pity, entitlement, and embellishment are not gone after going through these prayers and commands. The Lord will always free a person from the victim swamp when the relevant traumatic memories are fully connected and all interference has been resolved.

Common problems: There are a number of common problems that can get in the way of releasing these sins of the victim swamp.

1. Guardian lies can block full participation (for example, "If I get healed, they will never see or acknowledge how badly they hurt me," "If I let go of this entitlement I will never be compensated for the injury I experienced," or "It's not safe to let go of this bitterness – it makes me strong so I can protect myself"). Guardian lies can often be identified by going through the sample prayers and asking the person to pay attention to any thoughts of this type that enter his mind.
2. It *may*⁴ hinder release of the victim swamp sins if part of the traumatic memory and/or painful emotions associated with the memory are still disconnected in some way.
3. There may be a connected and/or deeper traumatic memory with the same theme that needs to be addressed before the bitterness, self pity, etc. can be released.
4. The victim swamp sins can be protected by vows, such as the following self pity vow: "I'll just sit out here in the rain until I die (I won't do anything to fix the problem) – then they'll be sorry."
5. Spirits of bitterness, self pity, etc. can be blocking the person and/or an internal parts from participating in the prayer.
6. Internal dissociated parts may be carrying the bitterness, self pity, etc. The internal

⁴Our experience is that all of the traumatic memory, including the painful emotions, must be fully connected before the person receiving ministry is able to release bitterness. We are not sure whether this is always required before the person can release self pity, entitlement, and embellishment.

parts carrying the bitterness, self pity, etc must be present, stay connected, and participate in the prayer. If these parts are not ready and/or able to participate in the prayer, it will not be effective (kind of like racing the engine with the gear shift in neutral – the engine spins but it is not connected to the wheels). The same problems that can prevent the adult person from releasing bitterness can also cause internal parts to be unwilling and/or unable to participate (guardian lies, traumatic memories and emotions not fully connected, related memories not addressed, vows, spiritual opposition).

It is ideal to identify and resolve these problems before going through the prayers and commands to address the victim swamp sins. Asking “Do you really want to release this bitterness, self pity, etc.?” and then “Are you sure?” with the person paying attention to any uncertainty or lack of internal unity, usually picks up guardian lies and often picks up dissenting internal parts. Guardian lies, dissenting internal parts, and spiritual opposition will sometimes surface during the prayer. Our experience is that it is still common to miss something, especially quiet vows and deeper traumatic memories that are carefully protected. It is easy to tell when you miss something because the bitterness, self pity, etc. will still be there when the person is done with the prayer. When this happens you can assume with a fairly high degree of confidence that one or more of these problems is blocking the way. Return to the sample prayers and commands when the blocking problems have been addressed. The Lord will always free a person from the victim swamp when the relevant traumatic memories are fully connected and all interference has been resolved.

Bitterness, Self Pity, Entitlement, and Embellishment

Sample prayers and commands

Never assume the person is ready or willing to be free. Always ask if he/she wants to be free from this bitterness, self pity, entitlement, and embellishment. Ask again: "ARE YOU SURE?" If there is any sense of uncertainty or lack of internal unity regarding letting go of these victim swamp sins, look for guardian lies, parts of the traumatic memory that are disconnected, related and/or deeper wounds with the same theme, vows, demonic interference, and internal dissociated parts that are not ready to release the victim swamp sins. Test these possibilities again if the bitterness, self pity, entitlement, and embellishment are not gone after going through these prayers and commands. The Lord will always free a person from the victim swamp when the relevant traumatic memories are fully connected and all interference has been resolved.

"Dear Lord Jesus, I confess that I am stuck in the victim swamp. I confess that I use bitterness, self pity, entitlement, and embellishment to protect myself, to comfort myself, and to get things I want. But I am tired of letting these destructive and sinful patterns of thought and behavior block my healing, hinder my relationship with you, and ____ (*can include other ways these affect your life*). I want to be free, but I cannot free myself. Unless you release me I will never be free.

"I now confess _____ (*bitterness, self pity, entitlement, embellishment*) as sin. I ask your forgiveness for these sins (*you can list them individually if you feel lead to do so*), I repent of these sins (*you can list them individually if you feel lead to do so*). In the name of Jesus, I now renounce _____ (*bitterness, self pity, entitlement, embellishment*).

"Lord Jesus, I ask now that you would wash me with your blood, cleansing me and freeing me from all bitterness, self pity, entitlement, and embellishment.

"I now choose to accept the life you have given me. I choose to stand straight in the pain from these traumatic memories, so that you can heal me."

(Optional) Prayer to tear down spiritual strongholds (2 Cor. 10): "In the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ, I/we command that all strongholds of bitterness, self pity, entitlement, and embellishment be torn down in my/ _____'s mind, body, and spirit."

(Optional) Prayer to deal with demonic spirits: "In the name of Jesus, I/we now command all spirits of bitterness, self pity, entitlement, and embellishment associated with these memories to go immediately and directly to the feet of the true Lord Jesus Christ. You will go bound. You will not touch or harm anything or anyone on the way. You will never return and you will never send anything in your place. He will deal with you as He sees fit."

(Optional) Prayer to break curses: “In the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ, I/we command that all curses in any way connected to or associated with my/ _____’s bitterness, self pity, entitlement, and embellishment be broken and rendered powerless, null, and void in my life.”

Go back to the traumatic memories and try to find the bitterness, self pity, entitlement, and embellishment. The person will usually discover that they are gone.