

Recovering From Spiritual Abuse

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Ezekiel 34:1-10
Leadership Series

This morning I am going to be continuing in a series that I have been doing for several weeks now on Christian Leadership. Last week I spoke about abusive leadership. I told you that one of the unfortunate, but very common, problems in church life today is, that folks find themselves in churches that abuse. Churches, instead of assisting people to find God, get in the way of people's relationships with God. And so when people really want to move forward in their relationship with God and they want to learn to hear from God or learn to read the Bible for themselves; learn to think and to grow, the church gets in the way and says, "No, your thinking or your experience is not welcome here."

Churches that are abusive are churches where people are not allowed to talk. You are not allowed to ask questions of the leadership. The moment that a person begins to ask a question, they get labeled as divisive, as being unwilling to recognize the leadership of the church or of the pastor. Even when the questions are asked in a warm and gentle way, they are not attacking questions, those who don't quite line up on every single point get isolated in abusive churches.

Abusive churches are churches that weigh people down. They load people down with lists of expectations, rules and regulations that are simply man-made. And only if you jump through all of the hoops and measures set up by the leadership of the church are you acceptable. But if you stumble under the weight of expectations; if you don't have the right kind of temperament; if you are a little bit different; if you are not part of the cookie-cutter mold, then you are tossed aside. You are shamed and considered defective.

I went through last week (I am not going to repeat the whole message) some of the criteria, some of the marks of spiritually abusive churches and leaders. If you weren't here, I want to remind you if you don't realize this, that all the messages that we do here in Vineyard are on tape and you can purchase copies of the tapes of past messages from the Bookstore. So, if you are interested in how I developed the theme of spiritually abusive churches, you can pick up a tape at the Bookstore after the service.

But today what I would like to talk about is recovering from spiritual abuse. Let's assume that you or somebody that you may be talking to has been in one of those places; maybe it isn't you, but a friend of yours, and you are sitting down and they described the most horrific kind of experience of being in one of these abusive churches. How is it that you would assist them to recover? God does not want us to stay wounded. He wants us to be healed. How do you recover? What does recovery even mean? And how will I know when things are better?

Well, let me suggest to you as sort of a hook upon which you can hang your thoughts of recovery that one of the main jobs that a person who has been

in an abusive system is the task of rethinking. Or to use Bible words, the task of renewing the mind. See, I believe the first thing that is on the plate of the person who is coming out of an abusive church is the need for mind renewal. And I say that because victims of abuse have suffered wounding at the level, not only of having money taken from them or being struck physically, or being shamed verbally—a true victim of abuse has been wounded at the level of their inner thoughts, their perception in the way that they approach life or a whole range of issues in life. What you see in a victim of abuse is a major wounding in the way a person actually thinks. There is tremendous distortion in thinking. Let me make this really practical for you so that you can get a handle of what I am talking about.

One of the classic features of a victim of abuse is that the person loses touch with what is normal, what is healthy. They have been abused for so long that the sense of what is normal, healthy, right and wrong just gets confused in their mind. If you grow up in a home, for example, where your father or mother was an abusive parent, one of the things that would happen to you is that you have lost a sense of what a normal, healthy parent is like because you have nothing to compare your parent's abuse with. You don't know, after a period of time, that it is not normal, it is not healthy to be cursed as a child. It is not healthy to be smacked in the face. It is not to be expected that parents would lock a child up in their room for twelve or sixteen hours and leave home. There are kinds of behaviors that normal, healthy parents don't do.

And so what I see occurring with victims of abuse, spiritual or religious, victims of Christian leaders and churches that have wounded people at the level of their thoughts and perceptions, folks coming out of those churches don't know what to even look for in a normal, healthy church. They walk around in healthy churches constantly surprised that they are not being related to in certain ways.

“Why are you Christian leaders not yelling at me?”

“Why don't you guys teach about the authority of pastors all the time and what people are allowed to do or not do?”

“You mean I can ask here?”

“Why are you not manipulating people or gossiping about them?”

“Why are you being honest?”

There is this whole need to rethink, to have our gyroscope internally reset again because abuse victims have lost their capacity to know what is normal and what is not normal. And I will guarantee you, if you have been a victim of abuse, one of the things that you struggle with is trying to figure out what is right and what is healthy. So you need your mind renewed about healthy things.

Finally, I focus on this business of rethinking because recovery in anyone – sexual addiction, substance abuse, divorce recovery, in large measure, is adopting a lifestyle of repentance. See, we as individuals must take responsibility for our healing. And part of the way that we take responsibility for our own healing is to adopt a lifestyle of repentance. Now, by repentance I do not mean to beat one's self or to say to yourself all of the things that were said to you in an abusive system—No. And repentance does not equal penance, paying God off for your sins: light 3 candles, say 5 prayers. Repentance in the Bible is a

translation of the Greek word “meta-noia.” The word “meta-noia” is a compound word. Meta means change and “noia” comes from the Greek word “nous” meaning “mind.” To repent really means to renew the mind. To change the perspective. To adopt a whole new vantage point.

What I will be calling for today in those of us who are recovering, I will be calling for a renewed mind, a changed mind about church leaders, a changed mind regarding the Church, and a changed mind, fundamentally, about God. Who God is and how he wishes to relate to you.

I’m calling today’s talk “Recovering From Spiritual Abuse.” Let’s pray.

Now, what I would like to do in inviting you to rethink, you who have been abused by churches and by leaders, in inviting you to rethink and to enter this process called recovery, I would like to start by inviting you to rethink your view of Christian leaders. Now, Mark Twain had a saying that a cat who had sat on a hot stove will not only not sit on a hot stove again, but will not want to sit on a cold stove either. And what you might be going through, you who have been abused or as you meet with individuals and find out that they come from a very difficult church background, you discover that people who have been burned are afraid of safe leaders also. They don’t only shy away from unsafe, dangerous leaders, but they are mistrustful of all leaders, even safe ones.

Part of the way that you are going to get healed in your relationship with Christian leaders is to rethink, renew your mind, regarding Christian leadership in general. Let me suggest a few paths that might be relevant to some of you in terms of “What do I need to rethink?”

You probably are going to need to rethink the nature of a Christian leader’s authority. That is the whole business of spiritual authority. I am going to just launch right out here and touch one of the hot buttons of spiritual abuse and that is the excessive authority of Christian leaders. So very often in spiritually abusive churches, the leader’s authority is so often taught on and the focus is so often on submitting to leaders and obeying leaders and following leaders, that people get the general perspective on spiritual authority that a leader, a pastor, an elder’s opinions must never be disagreed with. That to question a leader is to become a problem person in the church and be at odds with God Himself.

I would like to invite you to rethink a leader’s authority by tackling one of the strongest texts in the entire Bible on a leader’s authority. That is Hebrews 13:17.

“Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

Does this text suggest that we obey everyone who has the title of “leader” with unquestioning obedience and that the moment you disagree that you are in violation of Hebrews 13:17 and that you are a divisive, negative person who must be labeled, isolated, kept away from the body like a cancer? Just obey and submit and shut up or leave. Those are your options.

Well, I want to give you a few qualifiers on this text. Because nowhere in scripture is a Christian man or woman ever asked to give unquestioning

obedience to a pastor, to an elder, to a fellowship leader. And I believe the text implies the first qualification. One, it says, “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority.” Well, who are “your leaders” that we submit to? Anyone with just a title? Anyone who is called elder, bishop, reverend, pastor?

Well, the next sentence tells us, “They keep watch over you.” Literally, those who watch ceaselessly, those who spend sleepless nights caring for the church. The Reformers, as they dealt with the question of authority dealt with the issue of who “your leaders” are. This is John Calvin as he commented on this text.

“Our author’s concern is only with those who faithfully exercise their office. For those who have nothing [listen to this now, listen to this]...for those who have nothing except the title and who, indeed, abuse the title of pastor to destroy the church deserve little reverence and even less trust.”

A pastor says, “Obey me.” You say, “Are they fulfilling the office of pastor by faithfully watching over the flock?” Or are these people who are devouring the flock? People devouring the flock you give no mind to whatever and no respect. It’s not the title, it’s folks who do the function that we respect.

Second, when the Bible uses the word authority in a church it is almost always referring to the authority of God. See, I believe that the New Testament by and large rejects the fundamentally western notion of human control and human technique that we are so fond of. It just isn’t part of New Testament Christianity. Church leaders by and large in the New Testament simply asked to cooperate with the leadership of the Holy Spirit. In other words, leadership in the New Testament is charismatic leadership. Leaders are basically responsible to see that the Holy Spirit gets His way in a church service, not that the leader gets his way. Is that the view of Christian leadership you were taught? Leaders are people who assist the church to follow the lead of the Holy Spirit!

And then we need to look secondly at the meaning of the word “obey.” You know, the word “obey” here is almost always translated in the New Testament as “be persuaded by.” Or “become convinced by.” The Greek word is from the root word *peitho*—to be persuaded by.

I do not believe that the author is suggesting unquestioning obedience to a leader when he says, “Obey your leaders.” The word is not military style obedience. I believe the nuance here is “Allow yourself to become persuaded, to become convinced by your leader’s teaching and life.” Open yourself up to being convinced, to being persuaded by your leader’s life and teaching. If your leader does not have convincing teaching and a convincing way of leading, then you cannot fulfill Hebrews 13:17 and, frankly, that is a time when you ought to search out another fellowship. Not unquestioning obedience, but the willingness to be persuaded to be convinced, to have your heart and mind moved into a position of following. He is contrasting a softness, a responsiveness – a willingness to be moved. Be soft but don’t ever be unquestioning or undiscerning.

Finally, any command, any command in the Bible that calls us to obey a human being, human government, human parent, human Christian leader, human husband—any command calling us to obey a human leader must always be set over against the statement of the apostle Peter, “But we must first of all,

obey God and not men.” Never, ever, ever, obey any human being no matter what their title if they call you into a place that creates disobedience in your heart to the explicit Word of God in scripture or to God’s imprint on your soul that is your conscience. Your first accounting is to God before whom you will stand and your leader won’t be there. You don’t have to render account to your leader, but your leader must render an account to God regarding how they keep watch over you.

In this whole business of rethinking, we must also allow ourselves to draw distinction between false shepherds and true shepherds. You may want to check out Ezekiel 34 here. False shepherds are opposed by God. They will be held accountable for wounding the sheep. True shepherds follow God’s shepherding model. They heal, they protect, they are safe and sheep don’t have to fear or be always on guard.

Don’t say, “Well I can’t handle Christian leaders – period. I have been burned before and I won’t be burned again.” See, we need shepherds. We need shepherds because we, God’s people, are sheep. We are not cats who don’t need and barely tolerate anyone. The metaphor for God’s people is that we are sheep. And without a shepherd, the Bible tells us we wander, we go astray, we get hurt. We sheep do need to be cared for. We sheep do need to be led. We sheep cannot go it alone. We need to not only be led, we need to be fed.

And so what I am suggesting first of all is that you find a shepherd that meets the criteria in the Bible, and then you progressively open yourself up to such a shepherd, but not in an idolatrous way, in the way of unquestioning obedience, without limits or any of that, but you find a shepherd who meets these qualifications and then you ask the Lord to give you a love and trust in that shepherd so that you can follow his or her leadership so that you can receive and be responsive to his or her teaching. So that when there is a need for correction or healing that can also be taken in.

Well, we not only need to rethink Christian leadership, we also need to rethink the church. Again, just as with Christian leaders, there is a great temptation when people have been wounded by a church to give up on the church. I don’t know how many people I have met who have given up on church.

“You don’t understand what the priest did to a friend of mine twenty years ago.”

“Did you hear about the molestation in that church’s teen program?”

“Let me tell you what happened to my father, who was one of the deacons in our church.”

“Let me share with you the counsel a church elder gave me when I was being abused by my husband or how a pastor got a divorce after having an affair with someone in the choir.”

And so today, what we have is a huge amount of Christianity that is not related at all to church. There is a profound individualism running through much of American Christianity which basically says that Christianity is “me and Jesus.” I am so burned out by church that I would like to just stay home on Sundays. Jesus, I trust, but not the church. People are saying “God yes, but church no.”

I'd like you to turn with me to Ephesians 3 to assist you in rethinking your view of the church. The apostle Paul uses the word "mystery" here and this discovery of the mystery of the church is something that you in recovery need to rethink. Let me give you a little definition of the word "mystery" because Paul says in verse 3 "that is the mystery made known to me by revelation as I have written to you briefly." And then he uses the same word in verse 4 "...in reading this you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ." He says the same thing in verse 6, "...this mystery."

Many of you know that the Bible uses the word "mystery" more than we do in English. In normal English communication the word "mystery" means "something obscure, something puzzling." A mystery is something that we haven't quite yet solved. It is a mystery. We don't yet know the answer.

But in the Bible, the word "mystery" refers to something that you cannot know through human reason. Human reason won't get you the answer, but God has revealed it by his Holy Spirit to the apostles. A mystery is something that is hidden to human reason, but God chose to open up and reveal.

What is the mystery that Paul is speaking of in Ephesians 3?

He tells us what the mystery is in verse 6. The "mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus."

Let me tell you what the mystery is. The mystery is that there is a double wedding that takes place every time someone turns and becomes a Christian. Every time a person calls out to God and says, "Dear God, save me. I need to change. I need to be forgiven. Not on the basis of what I have done or I merit, but on the basis of what Christ has done for me at the cross in dying for my sins. Save me, O Lord. I trust in Jesus' bloody death on the cross as the full payment for my sin," the great mystery of Christianity unfolds and that is a double wedding.

First of all, that person is united with Jesus Christ. In verse 6 Paul says, "Share together in the promise in Christ Jesus." You get spiritually joined to Jesus when you are saved. But not only do you get spiritually joined to Jesus, you get spiritually joined to Jesus' church. The mystery is that through the gospel, the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body. A double wedding takes place at the moment of salvation.

And it's this double wedding, being joined to Jesus and to Jesus' people that many of us are shocked about. You know, we understand that we are joined to Jesus and we are very happy about that. Oh, yes. I want to walk down the aisle and have Jesus be there. And he will swear his undying devotion to me and I will swear my undying devotion to him. That is perfectly acceptable.

But the other wedding ceremony is you being joined to the church—that's a part that many of us weren't told when we signed up for salvation. It reminds me of Jacob in the Old Testament believing that he was going to marry Rachael and then waking up in the morning and seeing her sister Leah lying there in the bed. We wake up in the morning, after salvation, and we say, "okay, I am going to roll over and embrace Jesus." And, oh my goodness, look who's there—the church! That funny person who I have never gotten along with. That irritating

person whose personality rubs me the wrong way. The person who sings off key. The person with the annoying child.

And Paul says, "That's the mystery that I have been given revelation on." A double wedding takes place in salvation. You thought salvation was just you but it's also you and the church. You and Jesus, and you and the church. And then he says, "I get to be the herald announcing this double wedding of salvation." "What a wonderful privilege," he says, "has been given to me that I get to tell different groups of people about this wonderful double wedding."

And in verses 8, 9 and 10 he says, "I get to herald the wedding to three different audiences." In verse 8 he gets to herald the wedding to the Gentiles. "Although I am the least of all of God's people, this grace was given me to preach to the Gentiles." Gentiles, you are invited to the wedding. You can be the bride joined not only to Jesus Christ, but you can be a bride joined to God's people.

Then he says, "Not only do I get to herald this message to the Gentiles, but miracle of miracles, the church, becomes a part of the announcement to the world." "...To make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery which for ages was kept hidden in God who created all things." The world looks on. They say, "What is the announcement of the gospel? How shall we know that God has spoken?"

And Paul says, "The announcement of the gospel is more than four spiritual laws. The church is part of the announcement of salvation to the world." He goes on and he says, "And now the church becomes part of the announcement of the wisdom of God to the angels. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms."

Do you understand that the church, the existence of the church with a variety of people coming together from a variety of backgrounds—Jews and Gentiles, browns, blacks and whites, men and women—that the church is part of the announcement that Jesus Christ has come to save? The church's existence is part of the announcement of the wedding to the world and the church's existence is part of the announcement of the wisdom of God to the angels. And it's not just the invisible church where people say, "Ah, yes. I have a few Christian friends. I have fellowship with the invisible church—a few close friends."

No. Paul was talking about the visible church. Let me bring this down to earth now. The temptation of people who have been abused is to throw out God's plan for the church as part of the announcement of his reign and part of the announcement of his salvation package for you and to say, "I am so tired of church. I have a few close friends that I have chosen and we gather together on Sunday morning or before work during the week. It is really cool. We love each other, we help each other and we read the Bible together. That is my church. And I don't need the church out there. That is my church. A few friends that I have picked."

And the response to that which I think you could make from these passages is, "Well, you may have your church, but you don't have his church. You don't have Jesus' church. See, in your church you pick people like you. In

your church you decide to be with people who have similar ways of thinking to you, who have similar lifestyles to you, who have similar kinds of perspectives as you do, who are similar in socio-economics as you. Your church, you pick.”

But his church is different. See, his church is not a matter of you being with your friends. His church is called a family in the Bible. You know the old saying, “You can pick your friends, but you can’t pick your family?” Well, a renewed view of the church is that the church should always contain folks that you would never pick. And you embrace that. It’s okay to be in a church with people you would never pick but that He picked, who are just like members of your family. People who irritate you. People like your quirky aunt. People like your embarrassing mother. People like your crazy cousin. Folks who have terrible social skills. Folks who you find it hard to love. Folks who you would never volunteer to be with and yet, you find yourself in a place where all of these people are gathered. And you say, “Why would I want to be here? These are not the kind of people I would choose to hang with. Why would I want to be connected here?”

You connect here to bear witness to the world and to the angels, that’s why. Renewed thinking about the church says that I get to be a part of something that would cause the world and even the angels to bow down in worship before God. The angels will never bow down in worship of the wisdom of God by you getting together in a private little fellowship with a few like-minded friends. You can pull that off yourself without the help of God. Whatever you can do humanly will not cause the angels to bow in worship. But when you are part of a healthy church, and you are forced to depend on the Holy Spirit to give you love for somebody that you just don’t love; to forgive someone that you don’t have the power to forgive; to walk together with someone that you prefer did not exist and to actually grow to love them and to pray for them and encourage them and to care for their well being.

And when the angels see the Holy Spirit see the creation of a healthy church that actually can function together with all of its garbage; this group of human beings can actually walk together and be together and love one another, the angels say, “No one but God could pull this off. No one but God could empower people to love.” Here is the mystery of God kept hidden for the angels, but now revealed, that the gospel is powerful enough not only to reconcile people to God, but in the concrete, mundane, day-to-day existence of this world, the gospel is strong enough to reconcile us to other human beings.

To throw the church out is to say, on the one hand, I don’t want to be a part of the witness to the angels and cause the world and the angels to bow in wonder. Now I realize we’re not nearly there yet. But that’s what God intends. To throw the church out is to say, on the other hand, I don’t believe the gospel, the Good News of salvation, is strong enough to have me work out relationships with other human beings. Oh, I believe I can work out my relationship with Jesus, but its people that I hate.

No the gospel is plenty strong. It is plenty strong. Strong enough to place you in a church and get you to believe not only in Jesus, but in Jesus’ church again.

Finally, in terms of rethinking, a person who has been abused not only must rethink their understanding of Christian leadership and rethink their relationship to church, but they must rethink their relationship to God. One of the things that occurs in an abusive church is that people's thoughts about God get distorted, their relationship with God gets thrown off and, frankly, people come out of abusive situations with a great deal of upset and anger toward God, in terms of God allowing the thing to happen to them as we are going to find out. Questioning the justice of God and wondering what God is going to do about past abusive leadership.

You know the Psalms have proven to be a wonderful source of comfort to believers for almost 3000 years. The reason is because the Psalms describe very honestly the experience of people in their relationship with God in a very authentic way. And sometimes the most comfort that an individual could have is somebody else authentically sharing with them a very similar kind of experience and saying, "I understand what you are going through in your relationship with God right now or in your thought life because I went through the very same things." Sometimes what folks need is not so much of a didactic teaching, but another person who has gone through the same thing to come along side and say, "I understand." When you are really sinking down there is nothing more comforting than another individual coming along and saying, "Well, I have been through the same thing and let me share with you how I felt and the process that God took me through in bringing about recovery."

"I understand what it feels like to lose a spouse and I know what you are going through because I lost my spouse x-number of years ago and here is what I began thinking in the beginning. Here were my thoughts about God and here was my emotional life and this is the way the Lord assisted me."

I can tell you, if you have lost a spouse, we have others in the church who have likewise lost their spouses and you can find some help and some comfort in that area. The same thing is true in many other areas of life. To talk with someone who has similarly lost a job or has gone through a divorce or has been diagnosed with cancer can alleviate a great amount of pain.

So the Psalmist expresses in very honest terms his anger with God. He says in Psalm 73: 21,

"When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant. I was a brute beast before you."
I didn't get it and I didn't understand. And then he describes the two problems that he had with God.

The first is found in verse 13,

"Surely in vain, have I kept my heart pure. In vain have I washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been plagued. I have been punished every morning."

Now, it's very difficult to know what particular oppression existed for the Psalmist. It may be that he was plagued with an illness that wasn't healed. It could be that he was plagued with antagonistic relationships. It could be that one of his children was ill. It doesn't tell us.

But it does tell us why he was so angry with God. And he was angry with God because he felt confused and somewhat ripped off. He says "In vain have I kept my heart pure. In vain have I washed my hands in innocence." And what he is saying is, "God, I don't understand your ways. Because I have been trying to do the right thing. I could understand why I had to go through this great difficulty if I was the kind of person who was trying to blow you off; if I was the kind of person who never gave you a passing thought; if I was the kind of person who was only in it for myself. But the truth of it God, is that I was interested in you. I was attempting to pursue you."

And you see how a person who has been abused in the church could really say verse 13 with some level of integrity. "In vain have I kept my heart pure. In vain have I washed my hands in innocence." A person who has been in an abusive church could easily say that to the Lord. "Lord, you know, I got involved in church and plunged myself in ministry because honestly I thought that was what you wanted. And I engaged in all of this activity; I made all of these sacrifices; I listened to the leaders and I did what I really didn't want to do because I thought that was what you wanted, God. And along the way I had my head beat in. I was criticized. I was shamed. I was isolated and I was hurt. And I just don't understand your ways in allowing me to get wounded when I really feel like I was seeking you."

"I have been praying and praying, and God still hasn't helped me financially."

This is a great problem. But the Psalmist had an even greater problem, which he describes in verse 2 and 3.

"But as for me, my feet had almost slipped. I had nearly lost my foothold. (Why was I so unsteady in my Christian life, why?) For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked."

And then he goes on to describe the prosperity of the wicked. Not only do I not understand your ways regarding me, Lord, but I don't understand your ways regarding them.

And in applying it to an abusive church situation, I would say lots of people come out saying, "I don't understand God, how you can continue to allow leaders in churches to get away with what those guys are getting away with. And they really appear to be getting off scot-free. They are not taking responsibility for their actions. The abuse still goes on. They are just laughing and continuing to do the very same things. Lord, I don't get it."

Anyone who has been in a painful, painful situation for a period of time will almost automatically raise these two questions to the surface. Why is this happening to me when I have been trying to walk with God and honor him. And why is it not happening to them when they are the abusers. You know, those guys are laughing about God.

And the truth is that the ways of God, especially when we have been through a long series of painful blows can really confuse us. It is absolutely the case that Christians who love the Lord will find ourselves to be terribly perplexed about the ways of God. We won't be able to get it.

And the simple formula kind of Christianity that most abusive churches hand out to their members just won't meet the need at a time of tremendous hurt. You know, one of the things that abusive churches do is that they communicate a view of God that suggests that we ought to always be able to understand his ways. And this is the way God works. If you put in this amount of effort, then God is going to pay you out this amount. And we find that the God that was communicated to me in my abusive church situation is not what I am discovering about God. Something is off here.

I want you to hear something. It is not wrong to be perplexed. It is no sin, if at this moment of your life, you are confused about the ways of God. But I would tell you that in your moment of confusion at the time when you are most perplexed, Satan will use that opportunity for significant spiritual warfare. And will deepen your confusion by asking you all kinds of questions regarding the goodness and the justice of God.

And then the Psalmist says something that I, myself, have experienced. He says in verse 16,

"When I try to understand all this, it was oppressive to me."

You look at your situation. You look back at the past, five or ten years, and you say to yourself, "How can I make heads or tails of this. Where was God and why was God allowing these people to get off scot-free?" And you try to think it through. Maybe you are going through a financial crisis and you are trying to think through the ways of God. Why has God allowed this to happen? What did we do wrong? You are going through a relational problem or there is illness in your family. You are trying to think it through.

And sometimes, I would say most times, when you try to think it through, especially the kind of thing that the Psalmist is describing, this tremendous wounding, it actually becomes more oppressive for you. When I try to understand it, it was oppressive to me.

Have you ever noticed that the more you think about something, the worse you feel? When you are in a state of confusion and you try to reason the thing through and reason through the ways of God, the more the oppression grows. And the enemy introduces other evidence to you so that the only thing you can think about is other instances in your life of the seeming injustice of God. And other people who seem to be innocent and, yet, suffer. And other people who give no passing thought to God and who are abusers and seem to prosper.

Sometimes the oppression is so heavy that it just doesn't lift. It doesn't lift even when you go to sleep at night. You find yourself waking up in the middle of the night and you are already moving at a thousand RPMs. You are going through the same thought processes. What did I do wrong? What is God requiring? Why is this happening?

Do you know personally the oppression of trying to think your ways through the ways of God? Have you ever felt that oppression? When you are that oppressed the only time when you feel okay is when you are not thinking about the ways of God. When you are escaping from thinking by turning the television on or by drinking or by having sex, by getting involved in some area of escape. Folks that are that oppressed will often look for the door of escape to

run from thinking. Maybe if I move; maybe if switch jobs; because the oppression is so heavy.

But then the Psalmist gives us a way out. It's not the way out of more television or some escapist behavior. He says that no you can escape and your mind can be renewed and the oppression can lift, but it is not by you trying to think your way through on your own! No, it's verses 16 and 17:

"When I tried to understand all of this it was oppressive to me until I entered the sanctuary of God. Then I understood their final destiny."

You cannot think your way through on your own. The answer is that you must think from a different vantage point. You must think from the vantage point of the sanctuary. From the perspective of the dwelling place of God.

Martin Lloyd Jones, the English preacher very helpfully contrasts two ways that people think in many of his commentaries. And he says there is purely human rational thinking which just leads to oppression and then there is spiritual thinking, thinking from the perspective of God. It is thought, it is rational, but it is rationality on a higher plane. It is capturing what Isaiah says in Isaiah 55 when he says,

"My thoughts are not your thoughts, my ways are not your ways, for as high as the heaven is above the earth, so much higher are my thoughts than your thoughts and my ways higher than your ways."

You say, "What happens in the sanctuary that would cause me to gain spiritual thinking? This business of the renewal of the mind, I believe is intimately linked to engage in spiritual thinking being willing to become a worshipper of God.

Listen to me. You want to escape past abuse? You want to deal with present trials? You want to move on with your life? One of the things that you must be willing to become is a worshipper. I watch many of you week to week, and many of you who have come from abusive backgrounds, many of you who are presently struggling with a huge problem. You have not learned the secret of worship as an essential key to your healing. Maybe worship in your past church experience was mocked. Maybe worship was manipulated. Maybe worship was hyped. Maybe worship was non-existent. But to get a handle again on God and to be healed, the way in is through the door of worship.

If you will allow yourself to not just sing songs, but to really focus upon God and to say the words to the songs that we sing in Vineyard which are mostly "I-Thou" songs communicating to God, "I love you," "I need you," "I want to be embraced by you," you will find God renewing your mind. In worship God assumes the role as your counselor. Yes, you need counsel. Those of you who have been abused need counsel. Those of you who are presently being tried need counsel. But in worship, God the Holy Spirit comes along and says, "I will give you counsel. I will give you counsel as the wonderful counselor that I am, Holy Spirit."

And in worship God will start talking with you about things that you need to change inside. He will give you pictures of ways that he wishes to communicate to you. And he will instruct you regarding people that you need to forgive and needs that you have. In real worship, you will always discover that ultimate truth

of the Christian life – God’s agenda and our agenda are not always the same. Our agenda generally revolves around feeling more comfortable, having life go easier, being more secure. God’s agenda includes prying false props for our identity out of our hands and making us uncomfortable for a long while. He is knocking down some of our idols and bringing us face to face with the things that we fear the most so we can know God and so we can handle anything. Or agenda, the way we would do things is not the same as God’s agenda.

I believe that worship is one of the most healing places for an abused person. I didn’t get it until I went to the sanctuary, the Psalmist says. And what didn’t I get? I didn’t get, first of all, the final destiny of the wicked. Verse 17 says, “Until I came into the sanctuary of God, then I perceived their end!”

“Surely you place them on slippery ground. You cast them to ruin. How suddenly they are destroyed, suddenly swept away by terrors, as a dream when one awakes, so when you arise you will despise them as fantasies.” The Psalmist sees in the sanctuary as he worships that he really didn’t see very much at all before.

See, before he went to God, he was thinking about people’s lives and his life in terms of minutes, hours and days. He was taking a little slice of life and saying that’s all there is. What presently exists now. And it just felt terribly unfair.

In the sanctuary, instead of looking through his own zoom lens, focusing on a particular snippet of time, he went before the God of eternity and began to look through God’s wide angle lens. He saw the end of the life of the abuser.

Whenever I look at a moment in time and focus only on that, I can’t make heads or tails of it. But if I fit that moment in time into a whole life, and I realize that God has a plan not just for this moment but to order that moment into my entire lifetime, ah, then I can begin to open myself up and say, “okay. This is not all there is.” Somehow God, you are going to weave this all together. And likewise, even though this particular abuser or evil person seems to be prosperous, I know what their end is going to be. And I no longer am angry with them. In fact, I begin to feel sorrow for that particular abusing leader.

There is an old saying that the millstones of God grind slowly but they grind exceedingly small. It may seem that God is moving very slowly to correct an abusive church, but God’s millstones grind exceedingly small. There is nothing that escapes his notice. And nothing that he won’t deal with.

When the Psalmist went into the sanctuary, he began to think spiritually as he worshipped. And he began to fit moments of time into the course of a lifetime. You don’t have to do it over the course of eternity. Anyone of us who have lived for any period of time has observed this.

You look at a young person who seems to be happy go-lucky, carefree, no problems. And you watch them with their sexual freedom, dropping relationships and hurting people and they seem like they are getting away with it. And, man, everything is working for them. They are 21 years old. It’s really happening and everything is great and then you watch them, as those of us who have lived a little longer watch them get to 35 and 40 and 45 and you see the brokenness

already. They have gone through three divorces and they have children who are wounded and they are wounded.

You observe churches for more than a couple of years that seem to be getting away with abuse and they won't listen to any correction. But you watch them over ten years and over twenty years. They don't get away with anything. It all comes up. And all the attitudes that you saw that seemed to be not repented of, those things are dealt with.

The Psalmist saw something else. In the sanctuary he saw that God was with him. Verse 23,

"Yet, I am always with you. You hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel and afterwards you will take me to glory."

God has never left you. He was always there. Maybe you didn't feel Him. Maybe you can't feel His presence now but open yourself in worship and you will. The ultimate thing that the Psalmist finds in sort of restoring and renewing his mind about God was the wonderfully freeing discovering that as a result of this whole process of trial, he now found that God, alone, was really enough for him. He says in verse 26,

"My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. Those who are far from you will perish. You destroy all who are unfaithful to you. But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge, I will tell of your deeds."

In the sanctuary as he begins in worship and dialogue with God to rethink his view of God and rediscover who the Lord really is, he comes to the conclusion that everything else may drop off in a life and I may have suffered profoundly because of this financial disaster, because of my illness, because of this marital disaster, because of this abusive church—but I can now say in my experience that God alone is really enough for me. My flesh and my heart may fail, everything may drop off, but its good enough to be just near God.

And I will tell you something. Those of us who have not been through trials of a significant kind, cannot say that. Those of us who have not suffered abuse, likely, cannot say that. Indeed, we are really afraid of losing something. We secretly know, at least we secretly fear that if we didn't have all of these props up and if everything wasn't going well, our happiness would collapse and we would be miserable. And so, those of us who have not been through trials are, frankly, very insecure about life because we are desperately afraid that something is going to come along and rip off our joy.

The Psalmist says, "I have discovered a secret at the end of this whole process. That the source of my real joy can never be taken away from me. I'm set. I have a refuge, a safe place that can't be broken into and his name is Jesus. And I found him again." Let's pray.