

Breaking Out Of The Tahiti Syndrome

Jack and Trisha Frost

What have I done now? Once again, this was my first reaction to Trisha when she wanted to talk about how I was letting her or the children down. For the first 20 years of our marriage, it seemed to be a monthly event for Trisha to share how frustrated and angry she was for not feeling valued or loved enough by me. In those days, I often tried to save myself from confrontation by getting her to feel sorry for me.

Unconsciously, my strategy of self-protection usually went something like this: I can't seem to do anything right. I make a mess of everything. My life has been too messed up to ever be able to meet your need. Would you forgive me again? In actuality, I was trying to avoid true repentance by getting her to feel sorrow for how much I had suffered in life (self-pity).

By trying to draw compassion and comfort out of Trisha through self-pity, I was reinforcing a stronghold of pride in my life. Therefore, change was difficult. I was destined to repeat the cycle of avoiding intimacy because my pride (a form of self-pity) rejected godly repentance.

I had no issues with morality or integrity; yet, I struggled to experience true intimacy. For years, I sought help through deliverance, counseling, and healing prayer, but my relational problems seemed to be a never-ending story. I thought I would spend the rest of my life trying to perform well enough to earn love and acceptance, only to have the hidden anger within me surface again, disappointing those around me. The voice of self-pity (pride) seemed more powerful to me than the voice of God's love. So I yielded to it, thus perpetuating the cycle.

For days after these confrontations with Trisha, my thoughts ran toward escapism: Nobody understands me! If only they would quit having so many unrealistic expectations of me! Everyone is out to get me! 'Oh, that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest. Behold, I would wander far away, I would lodge in the wilderness. I would hasten to my place of refuge from the stormy wind and tempest' (Psalm 55:6-8). I began to call this destructive pattern of thinking "The Tahiti Syndrome." These thoughts of escape helped create a continuous cycle of self-pity and feeling like people were not treating me fairly.



“Poor Me!”

When godly sorrow and grief over our relational troubles does not move us to action, we can unconsciously remain under self-judgment and carry a sense of guilt and shame that easily becomes self-pity. Let's see how self-pity can hinder healthy relationships:

It diminishes within us the gravity of each sin we commit against love.

It hinders godly repentance by our feeling that life has not been fair to us and believing that others are the cause of our frustrations. Thus we do not look to God, but to people, to meet our needs.

It places the primary fault for relational conflicts upon others because we feel that we have been treated unfairly. If only they would not have done that to me... Or, If only they would treat me better, then I would not be forced to act in such a way!

It excuses our negative attitudes by seeing the weaknesses in others and feeling that our rightness justifies our judgmental actions.

It tries to get others to feel sorry for us in light of our troubles, thus reinforcing the stronghold of self-pity.

It may cause us to either compensate for our relational failures with increased hyper-religious activity and aggressive striving to earn self-worth or acceptance, or take on a false sense of responsibility and place all the blame upon ourselves for relational conflicts, thus denying others the opportunity to deal with their own issues.

It causes us to close our hearts to those who will not come into agreement with our self-pity, leaving them feeling manipulated, demeaned, and with little or no value or honor in our presence.

It may result in hidden anger at our feelings of loss or unmet expectations. This increases our blame toward others and results in deeper feelings of anger, insecurity, shame, isolation, self-condemnation, relational problems, addictive-compulsive behavior, health problems, and depression.

For 44 years, I tried to choose the way I wanted God to deal with my self-pity (by God changing others). But wanting it my way ended up strengthening my pride and control, instead of setting me free from it. I feared having to submit to anyone or anything but myself.

God knew the exact areas of self-pity that hindered me from healthier relationships, and He directed the Holy Spirit straight toward the pride that had been feeding so much of my insecurity and hidden anger. I kept finding myself in one negative confrontation after another that assaulted my control and independence. I was being stripped of the false sense of comfort that I found in my self-pity.

By 1995, everyone and everything seemed to be a trial against me. My self-pity continued to violate my family's boundaries, causing them to lose respect and any hope that I would change. The many relational struggles drained my strength. I had no energy left to keep up with the religious masks I wore, no ability to cover up the anguish and frustration I constantly battled from trying to blame others for making my life so difficult and unfair.

If I had only seen the strong, deceptive hold that self-pity had over my life earlier, I would have saved myself years of pain and frustration. The agony of resisting true repentance was so much harder to live with than the discomfort of godly repentance. Now I can clearly see how much my independence and control made the ministry of restitution so necessary in the first place. Asking God's forgiveness alone did not break the destructive relational cycle. It would take humility to displace the strongholds of pride and self-pity.

Love Moved to Action

When our unmet expectations become anger and frustration, we can either respond with self-pity and experience very little healing and change, or we can choose to respond with repentance that motivates us to action (see 2 Corinthians 7:9-11).

Godly repentance involves acts of humility—a willingness to be known for who we really are—and then choosing movement toward change.

Godly repentance:

.....is to be so grieved at the hurt that our actions and attitudes have caused others that we are willing to do whatever it takes to restore healthy relationships;

.....comes to hate the destructive habit patterns within us that have misrepresented God's love and grace to others;

.....becomes more concerned with others' needs than our own pride and walls of self-protection;

.....is being willing to lay down the need to be right in order to see healing and restoration in those whom we have hurt or offended;

.....chooses to keep an open heart and willingly comes forward and acknowledges how we have hurt or offended others;

.....does not seek to make excuses, put blame on others, or diminish the depth of our self-deception or fear of intimacy with which we have struggled;

.....takes the focus off ourselves (self-pity) and begins to focus our energy upon humility, confession, forgiveness, and repentance, and healing the pain that we have caused others.

Even if we feel another person is 98% wrong in a relational conflict and we are only 2% wrong, godly repentance takes 100% of the responsibility to walk in forgiveness and repentance for its 2%. Only then can trust and respect be restored in our relationships.

Practicing the Ministry of Restitution

God forgives us the first time we ask when we misrepresent His love to another person. But to break the cycle of reaping from the dishonor we have sown in our relationships, it is often necessary to make every effort to seek forgiveness and restoration from those we have offended before we are free from repeating the cycle of relational problems again and again. This is the ministry of restitution. (See Matthew 5:22-26; 18:21-35.)

It is not enough for a forgiving person to forgive you. You may still carry unconscious guilt and shame for the offense and have a need to ask for forgiveness to be free.

There may also be a blockage in the relationship until you acknowledge that you have wronged them. The other person may have forgiven you, but trust has been violated. Until you acknowledge your offense, it is difficult for them to trust you again. Forgiveness and trust are two different things.

In November 1995, God radically poured His love into some deep areas of need in my heart. But it was not in the arms of His love that my relationships were transformed. Between 1996-98, the cycle of self-pity was crumbling as I went through the humiliating agony of going to each person in my family, to my peers, and to those in spiritual authority over me and asking for forgiveness for the way my immaturity, attitudes, actions, and negligence misrepresented God's love and grace to them. It was then that many of the stubborn, habitual patterns of relational distancing (escapism) and destructive relationships began to be overthrown.

I applied the ministry of restitution and began uprooting the cycles of self-pity and escapism at home and the problems I had with those in authority by following the steps listed below. Perhaps it would be helpful for you to relate to your area of need.

1) Ask God to reveal each way you have brought hurt or offense to others (see Psalm 139:23, 24).

Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal the names of those people you have offended.

Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal the basic offense (how did your attitudes, actions, or negligence demean, devalue, or dishonor each person?).

Ask the Holy Spirit to bring conviction and repentance to each individual issue (see John 15:26; 16:7-8; Romans 2:4).

2) It may be helpful to ask mature spiritual leaders who know you personally to speak admonition into your blind spots.

Review with them the above offenses that you have noted (see James 5:16; Ephesians 4:15).

Give them permission to speak the truth, in love, to you about what they have seen in you that could be perceived as offensive or defiling.

Ask for input as to how you can approach those you have offended and bring restoration to the relationships.

3) Ask forgiveness for how your immaturity, attitudes, actions, or negligence have caused hurt or offense in others.

Be thankful for this opportunity for growth. God is using this situation to help expose hidden destructive habit patterns and to bring them to death.

Call on the phone or schedule a meeting with each individual person whom you may have brought offense or defilement. A letter is not the best way because it does not give opportunity for the offended party to respond, plus it documents, instead of removes, the offense. Approach them with humility and respect.

Schedule the meeting during the best time of day for them. Allow plenty of time to discuss the issue(s).

You may want a spiritually mature individual who has helped you see your blind spots and to whom you are holding yourself accountable to go with you.

Begin the meeting by telling the one who you have hurt or offended that God has been revealing to you how your attitude and actions have misrepresented God's love to them. Example: "God has brought to my attention how wrong I was when... (tell them the basic offense without going into detail)... It would mean a lot to me if you would forgive me. Will you forgive me?"

Do not go into too much detail. It gives the enemy something to work with and to stir up bitterness, resentment, or defilement in the other person.

Do not expect them to forgive you. They may, but do not require it, as it does not always happen.

At this time, do not mention their faults. Just take ownership of your own. (Later, if your spiritual authority thinks it wise, and some trust is restored with the person, you may go to them again about hurts you have received from them.)

Do not try to diminish your offense by blame-shifting, justifying your behavior because of past hurts, or making an excuse (i.e., you were having a bad day). That only serves to diminish godly repentance. Take full ownership of your misrepresentation of God's love.

Ask each individual you go to if there are other areas they may have personally seen that have brought offense to them or others. Ask forgiveness and apologize for each area they mention.

Do this individually with each family member, peer, office worker, or authority that you may have offended or defiled.

If your attitudes or actions have brought offense or defilement to a corporate group (family, workplace, church, or friends), you may want to gather the group together, after having gone to each individual. Be specific about how your attitudes have brought offense to the group. Ask them corporately to forgive you and to give you grace while you are attempting to make some changes in your life.

4) Ask the spiritually mature person to whom you are accountable to meet with you weekly or monthly.

Be sure that this individual is mature and is not afraid to speak the truth, in love, to you and that they do not come into agreement (defilement) with the issues you are having with others, but that they know how to help you judge yourself in each matter (see 1 Corinthians 11:31).

Discuss any other blind spots that are being exposed and have them pray with you over issues.

Ask them how you can grow and mature relationally.

As a result of seeking to walk out the ministry of restitution many times in the last eight years, I have just about left "The Tahiti Syndrome" behind. I no longer fear or try to escape from authority, confrontation, or acknowledging fault. Trisha and I have seen our marriage and children transformed and trust restored. After years of rejecting us because of their pain, our children are experiencing great healing. We now have a special place in their hearts. Many of our peer and ministry relationships have increased in honor, respect, and trust. And God has honored us to carry the message of His love and restoration to the nations.

Until the ministry of restitution is practiced, many seem helpless to progress further in spiritual maturity until their conscience is cleared from the offense their immaturity has caused others (see 1 Timothy 1:19). It is often those who refuse to make restitution who spend much of their lives repeating a cycle of relational problems; their issues of self-pity and pride justify the cycle and the lack of godly repentance.

We have received many testimonies of families and relationships being transformed through the ministry of restitution. It didn't require a dramatic encounter. It didn't require emotions or tears. It didn't require an act performed. It only required a choice: to humble oneself after realizing the grief or hurt their offenses had brought to others. When humility led to restitution, an increased sense of God's presence was experienced, victory over temptation and strongholds was evident, and maturity escalated in their lives (see 1 Peter 5:5-10).

The question now is: What will your choice be? Repeating the cycle again, or breaking out of the "Tahiti Syndrome" in your life and seeing humility, and God's love and restoration begin to release healing to your relationships?

In Father's love,

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