

When Sorrow Turns to Self-Pity

By: Gary Henry

“And Cain said to the Lord, ‘My punishment is greater than I can bear! Surely You have driven me out this day from the face of the ground; I shall be hidden from Your face; I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond on the earth, and it will happen that anyone who finds me will kill me’” (Genesis 4:13-14).



All who live in this world will have to deal with sorrow. It is inevitable. In an environment where sin is a reality, the temporal consequences of sin are unavoidable — and since sorrow is one of those consequences, we shall have to deal with it sooner or later. The only question is how we shall do so. It’s important to keep our sorrow from turning into what is called “the sorrow of the world” (**2 Corinthians 7:10**). This is the sorrow that wallows selfishly in its own misery. It does not confront sin in a godly way.

Two things are needed to keep our sorrow from turning into self-pity: **reverence** and **gratitude**. When we are passing through any bitterness of spirit, we must maintain a humble respect for the greatness of God as our Creator, and we must not cease to thank Him for all that is right, despite whatever has gone wrong. Even when the sun is shining, we find it challenging to be as reverent and as grateful as we ought to be. However, when the darkness closes in, keeping our thinking clear about God can seem so difficult that we despair. We give in to the “the sorrow of the world.”

Failures of reverence and gratitude should be seen as failures of perspective. When pain focuses our attention on some small part of reality, we tend to lose touch with the larger truths. This is no trivial thing, however. If we refuse to acknowledge the whole truth about God, that refusal can cost us our souls (**Romans 1:18-21**). God is greater than our woes, and whatever the immediate cause for our sorrow, we simply can’t afford to forget the clear tokens of God’s greatness and goodness in the wider world.

Edmund Spenser wrote of the miserable fellow who finds himself “dying each day with inward wounds of Dolour’s dart.” The sorrow of the world is deadly because it indulges in self-justification. It fuels resentment and resistance to God. Like Cain, the self-pitying soul feels no genuine remorse for evil. He merely whines, “My punishment is greater than I can bear!”