

THE SEDUCTIVE SIN OF SELF-PITY

THE DEFINITION OF SELF-PITY

- Life in a post-fall world brings with it a variety of wearisome struggles that manifest themselves financially, relationally, physically, spiritually, academically, and vocationally
- These struggles will tempt us in a variety of ways...fear, anxiety, worry, despair, hopelessness, lack of trust in the Lord
- One of the unique ways which suffering tempts us to respond is with self-pity
- Our carnal desire for comfort and ease will frequently chafe at the struggles of life in a broken world, which often results in feeling sorry for ourselves
- Failure to submit to God's purposes in trials will usually result in a hardening effect rather than a sanctifying effect
- This joyless bitterness often manifests itself in the form of self-pity
- "Self-pity may be the most unchristian response you can have...since you deserve nothing from God and have everything in Christ. Self-pity often feels like the most appropriate response to our circumstances, but in reality it is just a self-justifying way of being mad at God because He didn't let you control your life and keep your idols. In our self-pity we covet our own comfort and satisfaction as if it were the highest end to which we could attain. We feel sorry for ourselves despite the fact that we have been forgiven of our sins because we think too highly of ourselves and too little about our sins. We live and breathe as if we are the only thing there is to live and breathe for, which is the lie that your flesh has to perpetuate in order to stay alive. Self-pity is the ultimate provision for the flesh."¹
- This is what makes self-pity so ugly...it springs from the drive to protect our egos...it causes us to sulk and obsess over our hurts
- At the heart of self-pity is a disagreement and a dissatisfaction with God over how life (he) has treated us
- At the root of self-pity is self-centeredness, thinking that the world revolves around us
- "Self-pity is best defined as the preoccupation with yourself because your hopes, desires, or expectations have not been realized. It is unproductive and destructive to all relationships...Self-pity is sometimes mistaken for humility, but it is actually a prideful response, even though it may not feel that way to us or appear that way to others...Like the façade on a rotting structure, self-pity is a false humility."²
- "Self-pity is when we...have a self-indulgent attitude toward our own hardships. Something bad happens to us, and we decide to lament our loss alone — since no one else apparently will...At root, the sin in self-pity is that we assess ourselves and our circumstances as though God is not our gracious Father. When we take God out of the picture, when his pity for us in the death and resurrection of his beloved Son with the continued help of his Spirit isn't enough, we turn to ourselves for love and pity. When we believe there are gaps in God's love — and we use our circumstances as proof — we tend to take action to fill in those gaps with self-love or self-pity."³
- "Self-pity is our sinful, selfish response to something not going the way we think it should. And it's a subtle sin; we often don't recognize it right away because it wears the disguise of righteous indignation. We feel justified to indulge it after the injustice we suffered, even if all that happened was we didn't get our way.

¹ <https://expositors.org/joyful-fatigue/>

² Phil Moser, *Dead-End Desire: Biblical Strategies for Overcoming Self-Pity*, 7-8.

³ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/woe-is-me>

But self-pity is a dangerous, deceitful, heart-hardening sin ([Hebrews 3:13](#)). It's a spiritual deadener, choking faith, draining hope, killing joy, smothering love, fueling anger, and robbing any desire to serve others. And it is a feeder-sin, encouraging us to comfort our poor selves with all manner of sinful indulgence like gossip, slander, gluttony, substance abuse, pornography, and binge entertainment, just to name a few. Self-pity poisons our relationships and is often an underlying cause of our 'burnout.'"⁴

- That self-pity is not of the Lord is evident from the word "self"...such self-focus is evidence of the flesh and is contrary to walking in the Spirit

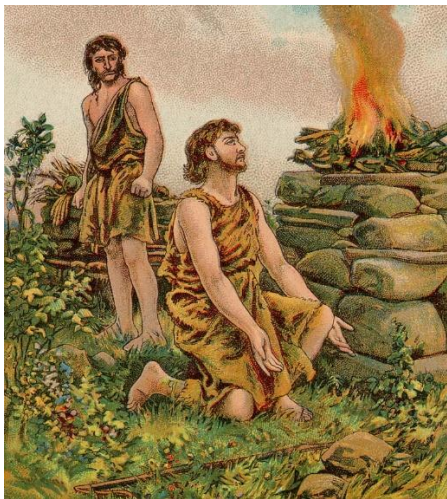
Romans 8:6-8 ~ For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, 7 because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, 8 and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

- "The self-sins do not die easily. They are more difficult to detect than obvious sins, such as immorality and drunkenness (Galatians 5:19–20), because we often consider them friends. Self-confidence, self-seeking, self-admiration, self-indulgence, self-absorption, and self-love are all symptoms of a fleshly nature that has not yet been fully surrendered to Jesus."⁵

THE EXAMPLES OF SELF-PITY

Cain

Genesis 4:3-5a ~ So it came about in the course of time that Cain brought an offering to the LORD of the fruit of the ground. 4 Abel, on his part also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and for his offering; 5 but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard."



- Cain brought to the Lord the fruit of the ground, but Abel brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions
- Although unrecorded in Scripture, God must have told them the kind of sacrifice they were to offer
- God accepted (or "regarded/favored") Abel's offering, but did not accept Cain's offering
- Many different explanations have been offered for why God received Abel's sacrifice but not Cain's
- Although we cannot know for sure which reason best explains why God respected Abel's offering and not Cain's, it may be a combination of the following:

1. In killing animals to clothe Adam and Eve's sin ([Genesis 3:21](#)), God had set forth a pattern that there were to be blood sacrifices offered to him as sin offerings. Although not recorded in Scripture, God likely instructed Adam (and then Adam would have instructed his sons) that an animal needed to be sacrificed to God to cover sin. Cain, knowing this, still decided to offer what he wanted, not what God demanded. We'll call this the "**type of sacrifice**" position. The strength of this argument is that it is appealing to the only other previous mention of a sacrifice, done by God himself, as a sin covering, and that it acknowledges the

⁴ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/lay-aside-the-weight-of-self-pity>

⁵ <https://www.gotquestions.org/Bible-self-pity.html>

importance of blood sacrifices mentioned elsewhere in Scripture (*Hebrews 9:22*). The weakness is that there is no mention that this was a sin offering in the passage, and there were many thanksgiving sacrifices later in Leviticus which were grain, not blood, offerings.

2. The second, which we'll call the **"quality of the sacrifice"** position, analyzes the text and notices that it specifically mentions that Abel brought the firstborn animals from his flock and also their fat portions while all it says of Cain was that he brought the fruit of the ground. Perhaps Cain had just thrown together his sacrifice, or maybe deliberately offered the stunted and blighted portions of his crops to the Lord. This argument is seemingly bolstered by *Hebrews 11:4*, which called Abel's sacrifice a "more excellent sacrifice" that could be referring to quality. We know from later Scripture (*Leviticus 1:3, 10; Malachi 1:8*) that God did not respect just any animal sacrifice: it needed to be an unblemished animal. He also required grain offerings to be done in certain ways (*Leviticus 2:1-7*) and that no leaven was to be mixed in with the grain (*Leviticus 2:11*). The weakness with this argument is that we are not directly told that Cain's offering was of poor quality or had leaven in it, or even if rules similar to the Levitical ones (given over 2,000 years later) would have been in place at the time of *Genesis 4*.
3. The third position we'll call the **"heart behind the sacrifice."** This position looks at statements God made to Cain afterwards, as well as some later scriptural passages. In *Genesis 4:7*, God asks Cain "If you do well, will you not be accepted?" The clear implication is that Cain had not done well but had unrepentant sin when he offered the sacrifice. Perhaps Cain had an unrepentant heart, and God may have rejected the sacrifice because of Cain's defiant attitude. *1 John 3:11-12 (NKJV)* may support this position: "We should love one another, not as Cain who was of the wicked one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his works were evil and his brother's righteous." This passage tells us that Cain's works were evil before he murdered Abel. And these "evil works" could refer to Cain's offering itself. This would imply that Cain did, in fact, violate instructions God had given (but that aren't listed in Genesis) for what type or quality of offerings to give. The weakness behind this position is that we only learn of Cain's anger and "evil works" after God had rejected his offering. That rejection may have been what sparked the evil works, not the sacrifice itself.⁶

- The reason God accepted Abel's offering but rejected Cain's is likely a combination of all those possibilities
- Ultimately, the reason has to do with the presence of faith in God and his Word on Abel's part and the lack of faith in God and his Word on Cain's part
- Abel went out of his way to please the Lord with his offering...literally "he brought the fattest of the firstlings of his flock" (v. 4)
- Thus, whereas Abel went out of his way to give the Lord his best, Cain simply discharged a duty

Hebrews 11:4 ~ By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous, God testifying about his gifts, and through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks.

- Abel offered "a better sacrifice" because it was offered in faith
- The key difference between Cain and Abel's sacrifice is that Cain's was made in disobedient unbelief; Abel's was made in obedient faith

Genesis 4:5b-7 ~ ...So Cain became very angry and his countenance fell. 6 Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? 7 If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it."

- Cain's lack of faith shows up in his jealous, angry response to God's rejection of his offering of fruit
- Rather than being concerned about remedying the situation and repenting of his sin, he became gripped with anger and rage such that his entire body language betrayed his resentment

⁶ <https://answersingenesis.org/bible-characters/cain-and-abel/>

- The Hebrew words here paint a picture of extreme anger...this was accompanied by self-pity
- God's merciful response demonstrates again that it is God who seeks out the sinner and initiates the desire to restore the relationship
- God's response to Cain invited him to respond with brokenness and contrition over his sin
- The Lord gently confronted Cain and reminded him that, if he did what was expected by His Creator, he would be accepted
- The kind and gracious prodding of the Lord should have brought Cain around to his senses to the reminder of God's constant care for him
- "What a marvelous exhibition of divine patience and grace!...With intimate tenderness and concern the Lord encouraged Cain to assess himself."⁷
- God's response to Cain also implies that he did not "do well" in that, instead of mastering his sin, he became mastered by it
- The word picture here is that of a wild animal crouching at the door, waiting to attack the one who opens it
- This is a warning that sin was about to overwhelm Cain
- Cain was so angry that he could not be talked out of his sin...even by God
- Instead, he sulked and felt sorry for himself: "Self-pity consumes our thoughts. The ensuing emotions drain the strength from our desire to change. Before long it feels like self-pity happens to us, that we have no choice but to feel this way. The question God posed to Cain is a good reminder for each of us. Ask yourself, 'Why am I choosing to respond in this way?' God's question point out that Cain chose to feel sorry for himself. He was not the victim of his emotions or circumstances. Self-pity, while an enslaving habit, was still a choice...In God's question we find a liberating truth: you don't have to be embroiled in self-pity – you choose to be."⁸
- His self-pity sprang from feelings of rejection: "Rather than receive God's instruction as constructive and work towards change, it was easier to interpret it as rejection and claim that any change would still be unsatisfactory...self-pity could not relieve those persistent feelings of rejection. To ease them he would need to find someone else to blame. His brother was the most likely candidate. Self-pity is rarely self-contained, and it usually saves its greatest destruction for those closest to us."⁹

Genesis 4:8 ~ Cain told Abel his brother. And it came about when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him.

- This is the first recorded murder in human history
- "Cain told Abel his brother" – Scripture does not record what Cain said, but when the opportunity presented itself Cain killed his brother
- Abel's death becomes the prototype of all murders
- Those who murder demonstrate that they are complicit in Satan's schemes (John 8:44)
- This murder was precipitated by self-pity, which becomes a doorway to a host of other sins



⁷ John J. Davis, *Paradise to Prison*, 99.

⁸ Moser, *Dead-End Desire*, 15.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

- This is a graphic reminder of the seriousness of self-pity
- The Bible provides its own commentary on Cain's rebellious heart

1 John 3:11-12 ~ For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another; 12 not as Cain, who was of the evil one and slew his brother. And for what reason did he slay him? Because his deeds were evil, and his brother's were righteous.

Jude 11 ~ Woe to them! For they have gone the way of Cain, and for pay they have rushed headlong into the error of Balaam, and perished in the rebellion of Korah.

- From these NT statements, it becomes very clear that Cain was not a believer, but is a prototypical example of a rebellious, wicked sinner who loved "darkness rather than light" (John 3:19)
- He was "of the evil one," a child of Satan
- "the way of Cain" is a description of the character and conduct of false teachers who refuse to accept God's instructions and instead openly rebel against his revealed will...they are lawless men
- Thus, we can say that self-pity is consistent with unbelief and ungodliness

Moses

Numbers 11:1-6 ~ Now the people became like those who complain of adversity in the hearing of the LORD; and when the LORD heard it, His anger was kindled, and the fire of the LORD burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp. 2 The people therefore cried out to Moses, and Moses prayed to the LORD and the fire died out. 3 So the name of that place was called Taberah, because the fire of the LORD burned among them. 4 The rabble who were among them had greedy desires; and also the sons of Israel wept again and said, "Who will give us meat to eat? 5 "We remember the fish which we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic, 6 but now our appetite is gone. There is nothing at all to look at except this manna."

- The people greatly complained about their circumstances, particularly their food, while wandering through the desert
- Moses finally had it with all their complaining...although he had usually handled it with grace, even he struggled with feeling sorry for himself in this situation

Numbers 11:10-15 ~ Now Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, each man at the doorway of his tent; and the anger of the LORD was kindled greatly, and Moses was displeased. 11 So Moses said to the LORD, "Why have You been so hard on Your servant? And why have I not found favor in Your sight, that You have laid the burden of all this people on me? 12 "Was it I who conceived all this people? Was it I who brought them forth, that You should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom as a nurse carries a nursing infant, to the land which You swore to their fathers'? 13 "Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they weep before me, saying, 'Give us meat that we may eat!' 14 "I alone am not able to carry all this people, because it is too burdensome for me. 15 "So if You are going to deal thus with me, please kill me at once, if I have found favor in Your sight, and do not let me see my wretchedness."

- Wearied by the complaints of the people, Moses forgot God's promises, forgot his presence, and instead threw himself a pity-party
- He felt alone, abandoned by God...which drove him to despair, even wanting to die rather than continue leading the people
- This is where self-pity leads...to a distorted view of the reality
- "Self-pity isolates you from your most meaningful relationships. You tell yourself you want to be left alone, but then you feel sorry for yourself when no one shows an interest. You say you would rather work by yourself, but then, discontented, you envy those who work with others. Before long you become so self-consumed that you're convinced you're alone even though you're not. Because self-pity is so closely tied to your emotions it's easy to shift the basis of your belief from God's promises to your feelings. This is a subtle

shift in thinking, but the ramifications are catastrophic. For instance, if your confidence is in the promises of God, those promises anchor you to God's unchanging character. However, if you determine your truth base from your feelings, truth becomes unstable, shifting like the currents of the sea."¹⁰

- Moses' self-pity resulted from a failure to trust God's promises and take him at his Word
- Instead of anchoring himself in God's truth, he leaned into his feelings
- Even though he felt alone, the reality was that he wasn't
- Moses failed to see that God never intended him to carry this burden alone (v. 14)
- "God never told him to carry the burden alone. Moses forgot that in all of those past miracles he was only the instrument, not the source. It was never God's intention that we should labor without his strength. When we attempt to do things on our way, the burden will get heavy quickly. When we choose God's way, we can find hope even in the most difficult of circumstances...This truth alone is a self-pity stopper. You are not alone; God is faithful. The trial, even though it may be devastating, is not more than you can bear."¹¹

Numbers 11:16-23 ~ The LORD therefore said to Moses, "Gather for Me seventy men from the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and their officers and bring them to the tent of meeting, and let them take their stand there with you. 17 "Then I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take of the Spirit who is upon you, and will put Him upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, so that you will not bear it all alone. 18 "Say to the people, 'Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat; for you have wept in the ears of the LORD, saying, "Oh that someone would give us meat to eat! For we were well-off in Egypt." Therefore the LORD will give you meat and you shall eat. 19 'You shall eat, not one day, nor two days, nor five days, nor ten days, nor twenty days, 20 but a whole month, until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you; because you have rejected the LORD who is among you and have wept before Him, saying, "Why did we ever leave Egypt?" ' " 21 But Moses said, "The people, among whom I am, are 600,000 on foot; yet You have said, 'I will give them meat, so that they may eat for a whole month.' 22 "Should flocks and herds be slaughtered for them, to be sufficient for them? Or should all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them, to be sufficient for them?" 23 The LORD said to Moses, "Is the LORD'S power limited? Now you shall see whether My word will come true for you or not."

- Moses had to come to a point where he trusted God to work in his circumstances
- He didn't really see how giving the meat to the people could be done...he figured if he couldn't do it, then God couldn't do it either
- "Ultimately we embrace self-pity not only because our perspective of self is too large, but because our view of God is too small. Just like Moses, when we struggle with self-pity it can ultimately be traced to a pride problem."¹²
- "When we attempt to do what only God can do, we fail to do what he asks us to do. The Bible teaches that we are totally inadequate to carry out God's responsibilities. Just like Moses, we not only do them poorly, but complain because the burden is too great to bear. This is prime territory for self-pity to grow, as God's dialogue with Moses reveals. So how do we overcome this tendency? By trusting God with those less than desirable circumstances and believing that he can accomplish something purposeful through them."¹³
- "It's not our circumstances that make us prone to self-pity, it's our dissatisfaction with those circumstances. Self-pity takes root in the soil of discontentment."¹⁴
- Fortunately, Moses was able to defeat his self-pity and he went on to trust the Lord, live a productive life, and was used mightily for God's purposes

¹⁰ Ibid., 25.

¹¹ Ibid., 28.

¹² Ibid. 30.

¹³ Ibid., 31.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Ahab

- King Ahab's wicked life is a prime example of self-pity
- He coveted Naboth's field and wanted to buy it; however, when Naboth refused to sell it he threw himself a pity party

1 Kings 21:4 ~ So Ahab came into his house sullen and vexed because of the word which Naboth the Jezreelite had spoken to him; for he said, "I will not give you the inheritance of my fathers." And he lay down on his bed and turned away his face and ate no food.

- He was so full of himself that the only thing that comforted him was a plan to have Naboth murdered

1 Kings 21:15-16 ~ When Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned and was dead, Jezebel said to Ahab, "Arise, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth, the Jezreelite, which he refused to give you for money; for Naboth is not alive, but dead." 16 When Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab arose to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it.

- Self-pity often leads to other sins, in this case murder

Jonah

Jonah 4:1-11 ~ But it greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry. 2 He prayed to the LORD and said, "Please LORD, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity. 3 "Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life." 4 The LORD said, "Do you have good reason to be angry?" 5 Then Jonah went out from the city and sat east of it. There he made a shelter for himself and sat under it in the shade until he could see what would happen in the city. 6 So the LORD God appointed a plant and it grew up over Jonah to be a shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort. And Jonah was extremely happy about the plant. 7 But God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day and it attacked the plant and it withered. 8 When the sun came up God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah's head so that he became faint and begged with all his soul to die, saying, "Death is better to me than life." 9 Then God said to Jonah, "Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?" And he said, "I have good reason to be angry, even to death." 10 Then the LORD said, "You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work and which you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight. 11 Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?"

- One of the saddest effects of self-pity is that it has an aversion to grace
- This is evident from Jonah's response to God's grace to Nineveh...everything felt so unjust...undeserving God was gracious to Nineveh, they repented and averted judgment, the shade plant died, etc.
- And, because God wasn't giving Jonah what he wanted, he threw himself a pity party, wanting to die (v. 3) and even blaming God (v. 9)
- His self-pity was evident in his shutting down emotionally and spiritually and his desire to just sulk and lash out against God who didn't give him what he wanted
- "Self-pity says I believe that something I desire and deserve is being unfairly kept from me. We struggle with self-pity for the same reason that Jonah did. We have unmet desires, and we believe we deserve to have them realized. Your unmet desires might include things like love from your spouse, respect from your teenagers, or gratitude from a fellow worker. These are not necessarily bad desires, but when you begin to believe you deserve them, pride is leading you down self-pity's road. When those desires go unmet, just like Jonah, you will become angry. This is why self-pity has an aversion to grace. It doesn't want a gift. It pouts, believing it has not yet received what it has earned."¹⁵

¹⁵ Ibid., 37.

- “You know that your thinking has been infected with self-pity when you consider the burdens God designed as an undeserved grace in your life to be an undeserved hindrance to your happiness. The fruits of self-pity make it easily identifiable when we open our eyes to it:
 - Self-pity causes us to doubt Christ rather than magnify Christ.
 - Self-pity causes us to cherish sin rather than mortify sin.
 - Self-pity causes us to avoid truth rather than meditate on truth.
 - Self-pity causes us to seek relief rather than holiness.
 Ultimately, self-pity will sap your service of all joy and foment a disorienting bitterness in your heart in the midst of your fatigue.”¹⁶

THE SOLUTION FOR SELF-PITY

Repent of It

- Self-pity is not merely a struggle...it is a sin that needs to be repented of

Walk by the Spirit and Put Yourself in the Way of Truth

Galatians 5:16 ~ But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.

- Walking by the Spirit involves flooding our minds with truth (Col 3:16), thereby effectively cutting off our propensity to feel sorry for ourselves
- “The battle against sinful self-pity can only be won when the weapons of truth are aimed at the object of worship. When your mind is flooded with the temptation to pity yourself rather than worship your God, you must mortify these thoughts with the truth. In other words, the lies that lead to self-pity must be demolished with the truth of Scripture. The truth must be the sword that cuts through the lies of self-pity, and it must strengthen your faith to be a shield against the satanic arrows of discontentment.”¹⁷

Aim for God’s Glory

- As believers, our greatest desire in life is that God be magnified in all things and that the glory of Christ be put on display

Trust that God is Working

Philippians 2:12-13 ~ work out your salvation with fear and trembling; 13 for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.

Romans 8:28 ~ And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

Preach the Gospel to Yourself

- “The cure for self-pity begins with understanding just how pitiful self-pity really is. It’s pitiful because it’s powerless. Our own pity for ourselves may conjure up some sympathy from sympathizers, especially those prone to feeling sorry for others. But it cannot ultimately do anything beyond feeling badly. Self-pity may succeed in winning attention and help from others, but it cannot provide the salve that heals. Only God’s pity

¹⁶ <https://expositors.org/joyful-fatigue/>

¹⁷ Ibid.

can do that. It's only when we turn our eyes to Christ and through him behold the incomparable love of our Father that our self-pity will shrivel and die — finally shown to be the imposter it really is in the light of God's powerful pity, his decisive grace, and his sacrificial love. When we taste and see the goodness of God in his Son and his Spirit, self-pity becomes a sorry substitute — worse, a mockery of the God who is love. When we turn to our own pity, our own love, for satisfaction and help, we are in essence denying the God who made us and showed us the meaning of love, for, 'in this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins' (1 John 4:10)."¹⁸

Take the Next Step

Philippians 4:6 ~ Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

- In faith, do what you know God is calling you to do and trust him for the results

¹⁸ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/woe-is-me>