

Pandemic Series  
Part 8. Feeling Unworthy©

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# Pandemic Emotions

## Part 8 – Feeling Unworthy

It seems another profound emotion is emerging from the depth of the self during this pandemic, coupled with all the social and political turmoil. It is so deep down, at the core of our being. I keep hearing it expressed in many contexts, most notably of late by persons who have experienced racial harassment and injustice and by victims of cruelty and crimes. But I am hearing it too in my counselees, and in group therapy sessions. Even in heart-to-heart conversations outside the therapeutic context, from an octogenarian after a stroke and from a young person under the stress of re-entry from overseas.

I believe this is another universal emotion – the feeling that deep down I am not acceptable, that in some way I am defective, that I am not good enough, that I am unworthy, or shameful. In my travels to 50 countries, teaching and counseling both men and women from more than a hundred cultures,<sup>1</sup> this feeling is at the center of great personal tragedies, in deeply touching narratives of lives in distress. It is difficult to find someone who does not feel this way at times. Hard circumstances and conditions make it worse. Fear and anxiety of our current times, with uncertainties of job losses and financial duress, as well as the threat of death itself, seem to bring it to the surface and amplify that inner poignant voice.

What is this feeling, exactly? Well, it isn't exact, and that is part of the problem. For most people it is usually a vague, and often suppressed, sense of not measuring up. Of not feeling “good enough.” There is often a sense of shame for being myself, as though my birth, or my DNA, or my family circumstances did not put me together quite right. A sense of unworthiness. This is not related to education, professional accomplishment, high or low achievement. I hear it from someone with five graduate degrees, which even in total have not managed to impart to him a sense of “being okay.”<sup>2</sup> I hear it from people with no degrees, who hold the hope that somehow that feeling would be dissipated by education, or prestige, or wealth. What we sometimes call “the American dream” is the opportunity to achieve a sense of worthiness through education, status, or possessions. Because it is illusive and not based on these factors, few achieve the sense of worth they seek.<sup>3</sup>

Related to this feeling of inadequacy, paradoxically, is a “deeper down” belief that we were made for better things. As I have listened for thousands of hours with persons pouring out their heart wounds and life distresses, especially injustices and traumas, I have encountered this deep-down belief, which seems to arise from the soul. No one believes that he or she deserves the bad treatment she or he has received. People express this in various ways, but at its depth it is a sense of indignation, of

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Dodds is the recipient of the 2019 *Paris Finner-Williams Award for Excellence in the Advancement of Cultural Sensitivity and Competence*, presented by the 50,000 member American Association of Christian Counselors at the World Congress in September 2019, Nashville, TN.

<sup>2</sup>A book which addresses this complicated belief and emotion is *The Imposter Syndrome*, by Harold Hillmann.

<sup>3</sup> Several books have dealt with this subject, especially for mid-life men, who come to their forties and wonder, “Is this all there is? Where is the reward for all my hard work? I don't feel any better!” See *The Lonely American Male* and other mid-life crisis books.

woundedness, that their worth and value, their sacredness, has not been recognized or honored. This causes bafflement, bewilderment, confusion, deep hurt.

How do these two—this feeling of unworthiness and this belief that we don't deserve bad treatment—relate, and where do they come from? I think we can find the answer to both by going back to the purpose for which God created us. Reading the book of Genesis in the Old Testament, and the books of Ephesians and Colossians in the New Testament, God clearly establishes for us that He made us in His image, to be His family, to be His people, to be His. He even says He created us with a divine purpose to fulfill. He made us for face-to-face relationship with the intent to make our lives a joy to Himself, and to give us fulfillment, joy and connection to each other in unity. (Ephesians 2:10, John 17:13, 23)

We can trace the sense of unworthiness, of being deficient or defective, of being inadequate, to the lie which Satan used to deceive Eve. God had placed her and Adam in the most perfect environment we can imagine, the Garden of Eden. He walked and talked with them. He showed them all that was good. This is so awesome to contemplate! But His enemy was jealous, and coyly told Eve that she was inadequate because she did not know both good and evil. He appealed to her on the basis that she could be more complete, more knowledgeable, more like God Himself in fact, if she would choose to eat of the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” which God had forbidden them to eat.

We know the story of how she succumbed to temptation, along with Adam. The immediate outcome was not that they felt more knowledgeable or more complete! It was that they felt ashamed, and they lost the opportunity to walk and talk face-to-face with God. His image in them was warped. Their closeness with God became uncomfortable for them because of shame and guilt. We could say, in modern psychological language, that their sense of identity and self-esteem were deeply disturbed, even radically altered. A sense of guilt, as well as self-doubt, became the human condition, along with doubt about God's intention for them. It seems that the lie, once established, has persisted, so that we are born with a primeval knowledge that we do not measure up, that we are to be ashamed and insecure. (See Genesis, chapter 3, for this account.)

As though that was not bad enough, each of us is born into a world governed by the “prince of the power of the air”—old Satan himself. (Eph. 2:2) He shows up in all forms of evil, cruelty, violence, and even in everyday disturbances of all of creation and in the lives of our parents. We are born into imperfection, yet we long for perfection. Our spirits, our souls, have not lost the deep-down knowledge that we were created perfect for that face-to-face walking and talking with God. We know we are made for “better things” than the inequities and trials of life bring to us. Even the worst battering in life does not erase our innate knowledge, because we were made in the image of God. That image has been broken, shattered, disturbed to the point of sometimes almost being blotted out, yet it persists.

It is as though our spirits or souls have a kind of memory back to the state of original perfection, just as our bodies have memories of our hurts, our wounds.<sup>4</sup> That is the source of our longing and expectation for better things, of our knowledge that we deserve more respect and love than we receive in a sinful, broken world. Due to this imperfection, none of us has a perfect parent. None of

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<sup>4</sup> Van Der Kolk, Bessel, 2014. *The body keeps the score. Brain, mind and body in the healing of trauma.*

Scaer, Robert. 2014. *The body bears the burden. Trauma, dissociation and disease.* Routledge.

us receives from the world the good for which we were created. Somehow, deep down we know this. Thus, we rightly react when we are mistreated, misjudged, misunderstood, and maligned or attacked. Our indignation is warranted!

I hear, even on the nightly news, people of all races blaming their sense of unworthiness on injustice and mistreatment, on racial discrimination. It is easy to “blame” the most dominant mistreatment for the sense of inadequacy or shame. Yet, the same shame is often attributed to parents, or siblings, or bosses, or other factors which make our lives miserable. It actually is activated by any of these forces and most powerfully when more than one wound us. Sibling feuds or mistreatment, racism, poverty, cruelty, and other deprivations or disasters *exacerbate* the feeling of unworthiness but are not the root cause of it.

We attribute our “not good enough” feeling to whatever stands out in our experience as painful and unfair. It is important that we recognize that our terrible experiences are NOT the *cause or root* of the sense of unworthiness. If we acknowledge this as a universal distress, arising from our human condition, we can be on the road to healing. We can become understanding of each other, more caring, seeing ourselves as all “in the same boat,” all the victims of the same lie. Very few of us are exempt. This common and painful feeling, and this recognition that we all deserve better, can bind us together as we acknowledge our common condition. I can empathize with you, with whatever suffering brought your feelings to the surface, because I am a fellow sufferer. We won’t need to compete with each other about who was treated the worst.

## **Can We Overcome? Is There Hope? Is There Healing?**

Yes! There is hope and there is healing. Our first step is to go back to our origin, to the truth that God made us, in His image. He made us out of His own goodness, for good, to do good. He made us for face-to-face walking and talking, to be loved and to express love. No wonder we feel disquiet and major discontent when our present lives deprive us of these things!

We can also identify and acknowledge that the LIE entered our world and our consciousness, destroying the unity and perfection of “the garden.” Fortunately, re-establishing the truth of our identity as God’s child and accepting His truth is the antidote for the lie. We can escape the consequences of believing the lie when we re-establish a loving relationship with God.

A major factor perpetuating our sense of unworthiness is how we talk to ourselves. I call this “self-talk.” Many of our negative “self-concepts-talks” (the inner dialogue with ourselves) become stuck in what I call “Hidden Heart Messages.” These are primarily lies we tell ourselves, such as “I am stupid.” “I can never do anything right.” “No one really loves me.” “I am unlovable.” These painful messages erode our sense of being loved, and like holes in one’s physical heart they cause our emotional hearts to bleed and to leak out whatever love is given to us. You can find a complete lesson on this on [Heartstream YouTube](#).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The presentation is titled *Hidden Heart Messages*. You can also view the originating video series, *Thriving! Not just surviving the things that are killing you!* You may rent each lesson on our website or purchase the set of 20 lessons. [heartstreamresources.org](http://heartstreamresources.org)

### Three Consequences of the Lie

Each one of these consequences has an “antidote” provided by Jesus having come into the world to die for our salvation and restoration and then giving His Holy Spirit to us.

- **Mortality**—Death came about through the lie, the deception, the disobedience, but Jesus conquered death and He grants us eternal life! (I Cor. 15:21, 22)
- **Sin**—The propensity to do the wrong things that violate wholeness and spiritual purity. *God’s “law” is His heart spelled out for our practice of living in relationship with Him and our health with each other.* His Holy Spirit enables us to resist temptation. (I Cor. 10:13)
- **Weakness** (lack of spiritual power)—God gives us His Holy Spirit to strengthen us. He even says His power is *made perfect* in our weakness! (II Cor. 12:9) The Spirit is our power for living! He energizes us for life and godliness (II Peter 1:3)

### Ways to Counter the Lie:

Here is how you can receive healing for your heart, getting rid of the feeling of shame and unworthiness. “**Arise and shine, for you light has come...**and your healing will quickly appear” (Isaiah 60:1, 2) Use this helpful acronym,

“**Arise...**”

- **Acknowledge** that you want to be restored to God’s purpose—relationship to Him.
- **Receive** Jesus’ death as the way back to living with Him and by accepting His forgiveness for seeking your own way rather than His. (That’s what sin is.) Jesus’ death paid for all your sin, and mine, so we need not carry guilt or shame because of it. (Heb.12:17, 1 John 2:2)
- **Invite** the Holy Spirit to fill you up, to live in you. The mystery which all ages have waited to discover, the Apostle Paul tells us, is “Christ in you.” Yes, Jesus, by means of the Spirit, lives in us. The wholeness or fullness of God makes us whole—He lives in us and we live in Him! (Col. 1:27)
- **Savor** the profound love God has for you. Ask Him to fill you up with it, to allow you to experience it at a deep heart level. Also accept His love from people! Even one person who loves you unconditionally can change your life and your emotions! See the characteristics of God’s love for you in I Corinthians, chapter 13. As we allow love to sink deeply into our very being, it heals the shame and sense of unworthiness. “We are accepted in the beloved.” (Eph.1:4-14) Acceptance is our antidote to shame. Forgiveness is the antidote to guilt.
- **Experience** the beauty of continual attachment to the Lord by getting to know Him more and more. You do this through meditating on His Word, daily dialogue with Him, and doing everything that you understand pleases Him.<sup>6</sup> What pleases Him is actually what is best for you! (Another lie of the FATHER of LIES is that God’s will is stoney or boring!) Remember

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<sup>6</sup> You may want to read the outcomes of my research on how the most loving and fruitful Christians developed into their mature selves through their practices. See Dodds, Lois A. 1992. *The perception and experience of supernatural spiritual power for personality growth and change: An analysis of twelve life histories.* University of California, Santa Barbara, CA. Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Dissertation Information Service. A summary of this is also available: “The Role of The Holy Spirit in Personality Growth and Development.” *Journal of Psychology and Christianity.* Summer, 1999. pp. 129-139. (centerpiece article, by invitation)

Jesus' command that we are to love one another as He has loved us? Isn't that the best for you? for me? We learn to do this walking with God by "walking in the Spirit" instead of following the selfish old ways. (Gal. 4:16-18) In the Old Testament God's people were told to bind His word on their foreheads as a constant reminder.<sup>7</sup> Maybe now we can fill our cell phones with His Word for constant reference and reflection!

### **"Shine..."**

- **Shine** because His face shines upon you! You can be radiant when you look to Him and experience his love face-to-face. (Psalm 34:5)
- **Heed** His command to love Him with a whole heart, soul and mind (Duet. 6:4) and to love one another as He loves us. (John 15:9). Sharing His love with others brings it back to us, over and over. Love is like a boomerang, designed to come back to us as we give it out to others.
- **Imagine** all He has in store for you! He wants you to be with Him where He will be, that is how deep His love attachment is to us! Imagine eternity with the One who loves you perfectly, the One whom you have grown to love!
- **Never** forget His love. Make it the bedrock of your life and of all your relationships!
- **Equip** yourself to serve Him out of a whole heart. Enacting His love on behalf of other people is the most fulfilling life you can have. It is the healing life, for each act of caring/healing for someone else circles back to heal us more and more deeply.

## **What Blocks God's Love?**

Certain attitudes and practices block the feeling of God's love—our engagement with Him. They can perpetuate the sense of unworthiness, heap guilt onto us, and cause us to doubt. Scripture calls these "footholds of Satan." They involve living according to our "old" ways before we learned to live by God's Spirit. This old life is called "walking in the flesh," which lead us to sin. This is in contrast to "walking in the Spirit" through the power of the Holy Spirit within us. (Gal. 4:16-18)

My husband put together a helpful list of these disturbing and destructive things. You can find them here in the appendix.

## **Appendix: Footholds of Satan**

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Satan gains entry into our lives through certain actions or attitudes, such as unresolved anger ("In your anger do not sin.' Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold." (Eph. 4:26-27) We need to be especially vigilant, acknowledging wrong and hurtful attitudes to God immediately without covering them up or justifying them. Knowing ahead of time how Satan attempts to work his way into our lives in order to undermine us can help us resist his sabotage. Here are some of the footholds by which he gains entry into our lives.

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<sup>7</sup> A phylactery was a small leather box containing OT scriptures worn by Jewish men at morning prayer as a reminder to keep God's law.

## **Attitudes**

### 1. Pride, anxiety and despair: I Peter 5:5-9

“Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’<sup>6</sup>Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.<sup>7</sup>Cast all your anxiety upon him because he cares for you. Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.<sup>9</sup>Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of suffering.”

### 2. Unforgiving attitude: II Cor. 2:10,11

“If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven — if there was anything to forgive — I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake,<sup>11</sup>in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.” Failure to forgive hurts both parties!

### 3. Jealousy, envy and selfish ambition : James 3:14-16

“<sup>14</sup>But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. <sup>15</sup>Such ‘wisdom’ does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. <sup>16</sup>For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.”

### 4. Unbelief, discouragement, hardness of heart: Heb. 3:12,13

“See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living god. <sup>13</sup>But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.”

### 5. Bitterness: Heb.12:14,15

“Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. <sup>15</sup>See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.”

### 6. Conceit: I Tim. 3:6

“He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil.”

## **Trials of life which threaten our faith:**

II Thes.3:2,3 “And I pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men, for not everyone has faith. <sup>3</sup>But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one.”

## **Behaviors:**

### 1. Having your own way: James 4:1-10

<sup>1</sup>What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? <sup>2</sup>You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. <sup>3</sup>When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

<sup>4</sup>You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. <sup>5</sup>Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? <sup>6</sup>But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says:

“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

<sup>7</sup>Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. <sup>8</sup>Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. <sup>9</sup>Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. <sup>10</sup>Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.”

2. Willful disobedience (following Satan): I Tim. 5:14-15

“So I counsel younger widows to marry, to have children, to manage their homes and to give the enemy no opportunity for slander. <sup>15</sup>Some have in fact already turned away to follow Satan.”

3. Lying and deception: Acts 5:3

“ Then Peter said, ‘Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land?’”

II Cor. 11:3 “But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ.”

4. Sexual sin: I Cor. 7:5

“Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.”

5. A bad reputation: I Tim. 3:7, 5:14

“He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.” “So I counsel younger widows to marry, to have children, to manage their homes and to give the enemy no opportunity for slander.”

6. Moral shortcut (the end justifies the means): Luke 4:5-7

<sup>5</sup>The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. <sup>6</sup>And he said to him, “I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. <sup>7</sup>So if you worship me, it will all be yours.”

I Thes. 3:5 “For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless.”



## HOW SATAN CAN AFFECT BELIEVERS

Gen. 3: 1-5	Accuses God to us
Job 1,2	Can cause physical affliction
Daniel 10: 12,13	Hinders answers to prayer
Matt. 4:6	Quotes Scripture
Matt. 12: 22-24	Can cause physical affliction (see Luke 11:14)
John 8:44	Lies
John 10:10	Tries to kill, steal and destroy
Acts 13:8-10	Withstands Christians, perverts the right ways of God
II Cor. 2:11	Schemes
II Cor. 4:4	Blinds the eye of unbelievers to the gospel
II Cor. 11:3	Deceives our minds
II Cor. 11:14,15	To deceive, transforms self into angel of lights and servants into ministers of righteousness
II Cor. 12:7	Buffets and torments
Eph. 4:26, 27	Tries to get a foothold
Eph. 6:16	Sends fiery darts
I Thess. 2:18	Hinders Paul's plan
I Thess. 3:5	Tempts us
I Peter 5:8,9	Seeks to devour
Rev. 2:10	Put believers in prison
Rev. 12:10	Accuses us to God