

Wounded or Broken?

by John Coblentz

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In the Bible we read about a "wounded spirit" and also about a "broken spirit." In some ways the meaning of these two terms is similar. Both terms indicate distress. It is possible even that one person may have a wounded spirit in response to the same situation that results in a broken spirit for another person.

But the two terms stand in contrast. First let's consider how they are used in Scripture.

"The spirit of a man will sustain his infirmity; but a wounded spirit who can bear?" (Proverbs 18:14). The same Hebrew word is translated *broken* in Proverbs 17:22, where we read, "...a broken spirit drieth the bones." The Hebrew word literally means "stricken." In both verses the NIV says "a crushed spirit."

A "wounded spirit" is one that is hurting, but one in which the hurt has festered into unbearable attitudes and responses. A person with a wounded spirit lives in inner misery that focuses regularly on his injuries. Out of this focus come the following "unbearable" characteristics:

1. *A negative mind-set.* The person with a wounded spirit is preoccupied with past injuries. He views incidents in life in the worst light. He sees the bad and ignores the good. His mind is filled with woes, suspicion, and assumption of evil.
2. *Victim reasoning.* With a wounded spirit, a person views himself as a sufferer. He can turn even kind actions of others into additional grievances, into added pain in his life. He is pleased when others notice his misery, and hurt when they do not.
3. *Grievance mannerisms.* Out of a wounded spirit come sighs, groans, and exclamations that draw attention to the hurt. There is body language such as shaking the head, throwing dark looks, facial misery, and slumped shoulders.
4. *Blame tactics.* A person with a wounded spirit holds other people responsible for the misery in his life. In truth, others may have done him wrong, but those wrongs become the means of blaming others. The wounded spirit is able to cough up old injuries no matter what the present subject. The stories that are told put others in the worst light. In addition to direct blame, there are ways of insinuating--giving details in such a way that worse is implied.

Is it any wonder the proverb exclaims, "A wounded spirit, who can bear!" Out of the wound oozes the stench of *self-pity*, bitterness, and accusation.

In contrast to this is the *broken spirit*. "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise" (Psalm 51:17).

The Hebrew word translated *broken* is a strong word. It means "wrecked, shattered, even crippled or maimed." The Lord delights in the person with a broken spirit. In Psalm 51, characteristics associated with such brokenness include:

1. *Acknowledgment of wrong.* A person with a broken spirit does not make excuses or blame others. He takes full responsibility for his wrongdoing.
2. *Contrition.* A broken spirit produces genuine sorrow.
3. *Humility.* Self-will has been shattered. There is no attempt to lift oneself up.
4. *Seeking after God.* The person with a broken spirit has faced his own poverty and sin. He has no righteousness of his own to promote, but rather, he seeks to know God.
5. *Teachability.* He is done with his own answers to life and is ready to turn to the Lord for help. He does not want his problem explained or justified; instead, he wants help to change.
6. *Unworthiness.* The person who is broken in spirit does not demand, he asks. His focus is not on getting all that he deserves because he knows he has been spared from what he really deserves. He is grateful instead of complaining. He has tasted mercy, and he is done with demanding rights.

Much as a wounded spirit makes a person difficult to live with, a broken spirit makes a person a joy to be around. He has a tenderness in manner, a gratitude for what others do, a humility about himself, and a gentleness in relating to others who have faults.

God heals the broken-hearted. He declares that He will dwell "with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit" (Isaiah 57:15). When we experience brokenness and the blessings that follow, we wonder why we resisted such joy and freedom for so long.

I am told that one village that received the Gospel for the first time and experienced genuine brokenness began the custom of greeting one another, "Do I meet you broken, brother?" Perhaps this would be a good practice to begin.