

NOTE TO THE READER

Addressing a complex topic such as *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (PTSD) within the confines of a brief booklet is a daunting task, to say the least. The instances of trauma that spark this struggle are vast, and the horrors it exudes in the mind are beyond what many of us can imagine. The symptoms associated with this diagnosis epitomize the notion of intense, paralyzing fear while reminding us (i.e., family, friends, helpers) of our duty to offer an abundance of compassion and love to those suffering from this debilitating problem.

The booklet you are about to read points to the unquestionable fundamentals of life—fundamentals we cannot afford to ignore if we hope to navigate this issue well. It incorporates the redemptive narrative of creation, fall, and redemption as they relate to the experiences associated with PTSD. This diagnosis, as it is conceptualized by our culture, is rooted in an existential threat—the experience of being confronted with danger, a threat to one’s physical well-being, or even a close encounter with death. These are things to which the gospel courageously speaks. As such, this booklet attempts to guide readers back to the essence of their existence in an effort to help them recapture the peace and contentment inherent in functioning with God’s glory as their greatest aim.

There are numerous resources that offer a myriad of methods to address the specific symptoms associated with PTSD. These methods can assist victims to gain control over things like panic, rage, and uncontrollable flashbacks. Without question, such resources should be utilized to the glory of God. This booklet does not attempt to cover similar methods in great detail.

Instead, it provides a sound worldview to understand yourself, your suffering, and most importantly God as you wade through the numerous struggles associated with this diagnosis. The ideas offered here will serve to undergird everything you do as you seek to address the symptoms associated with PTSD. They will lead you to your place in the world and point you to a God whose commitment to your good will strike you with awe. Soak in these truths as healing water to your soul, and in faith seek to apply each principle. May his Spirit grant you everything you need for this journey!



A night that will forever be etched in the depths of my consciousness is September 10, 2001. My wife and I were ten months into raising our first child. Since we were wrestling through the scarcity of funds brought on by my menial practice as a counseling intern, that evening found me at home babysitting my son while my precious wife supplemented our income as a hardworking labor-and-delivery nurse. It was a time of challenge, but for two youngsters trying to make our way in the big city of Fort Worth, it was an exciting season in our lives.

I remember the evening well. I was watching the opening game of *Monday Night Football*, and the Giants were facing off with the Broncos. The cool breeze of fall crept through the raised windows in our tiny living room, and I held our baby boy while he gulped down his final bottle before bedtime. Peace was in the air. Staring into my son's innocent-looking eyes, I had one of those moments when I was keenly aware of God's infinite love in our lives. I remember thinking, *This is going to be an amazing year. Thank you, Father, for all you have given us.* I don't remember if I finished the football game, but I am certain I went to bed that night with a hopeful heart.

The next morning began with my common routine of coffee and prayer. Shortly thereafter, I turned on the television to catch the news before heading off to a full day of counseling. On the screen I saw a place where my wife and I had been the day after our wedding, just three years before. Something was different though. The tall pristine buildings we had visited were engulfed in smoke, and at that moment I witnessed the chaos of 9/11 unfold before my eyes. The hope and calm of the night before was engulfed by horror and sadness. The joy of just a few hours earlier, brought on by thoughts of raising my son, were replaced with literal terror as I thought of him having to grow up in such a wretched world. As with all Americans that day, my life changed.

I saw my first client that morning, my mind barely able to focus. He was struggling with issues related to schizophrenia and was far more concerned about the government microphones that were recording our sessions than anything happening in New York or Washington, DC. As I listened to him elaborate on his latest conspiracy theory, pregnant with paranoia, I journeyed into my own existential nightmare. What was my life going to be like in this new age of terror? Was my family going to experience the agony of a biological or chemical attack? Would we ever step foot on an airplane again to go visit my in-laws in New York? Was the economy going to crash? Was God going to let America be decimated by evil? I admit I was in a complete state of self-protection with my kingdom at the forefront.

WHAT IS POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER?

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is described by psychiatry as

the development of characteristic symptoms following exposure to an extreme traumatic stressor involving direct personal

experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one's physical integrity; or witnessing an event that involves death, injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of another person.¹

A few examples cited in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* include serving in military combat, being a victim of violent personal assault, being kidnapped, being taken hostage, seeing or experiencing a terrorist attack, being tortured, being incarcerated as a prisoner of war or in a concentration camp, or being involved in an automobile accident.² As one reads the list of potential contexts in which a person can develop symptoms cited within this diagnosis, it becomes apparent that PTSD is not reserved exclusively to the combat soldier; instead, it has the potential to touch anyone who has experienced a strong sense of threat to his or her physical well-being. As a biblical counselor, it is important to seriously consider the question, Does the Bible bear any weight in helping someone who has such a complex diagnosis as PTSD?

As we begin answering this question, it is important to remember that the label PTSD simply explains a person's behavior and thought processes while taking into account the context in which such patterns developed. In essence it describes a profoundly intense response to a profoundly intense, danger-provoking experience. These responses are centered in fear, terrifying vulnerability, and an exacerbated awareness of not being in control. They are often involuntary and may include things like "recurrent and intrusive distressing recollections of the event, including images, thoughts, or perceptions," "recurrent distressing dreams of the event," "acting or feeling as if the traumatic event were recurring," "efforts to avoid thoughts, feelings, or

1. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2000), 463.

2. *Ibid.*

conversations associated with the trauma,” or “difficulty falling or staying asleep.”³ While some of these responses feel completely involuntary, it is important for the individual to embrace the reality that they are responses nonetheless, implying the hope that a different response is possible. As such, by God’s power and grace a person can respond increasingly in wholeness, love, and integrity. However, for the person experiencing the impulsive reactions associated with the label PTSD, these responses seem almost impossible. Let’s consider one reason for this.

FIGHT OR FLIGHT: OUR AUTO-RESPONSE

As human beings we have been gifted with sensory perceptions designed to assist us in times of danger. When we are faced with a potentially harmful situation, these systems create a response commonly referred to as “fight or flight.” This response is highly physiological and correlates with a part of the brain called the hypothalamus. So if a person is threatened, the brain releases large amounts of chemicals such as adrenaline, noradrenaline, and cortisol, causing the heart rate to significantly increase and the respiratory system to kick into overdrive, creating enormous amounts of energy in preparation for the individual to either fight off the threat or run from it. I remember once seeing a video of a helicopter crash in which the pilot was trapped in the wreckage mostly submerged under water. He was literally seconds from death. People were scrambling everywhere when suddenly a large man ran to the helicopter, knelt down, grabbed the bottom of what was left of the huge aircraft, and lifted it just enough for the pilot to break free. He did this all by himself! This seemingly supernatural surge of strength was due, in large part, to the chemical reactions associated with the “fight or flight” response.

3. Ibid., 468.

While this response has been wired into our physiology by our gracious Creator and is a good and wonderful attribute when danger is present, it cannot become *the* dominant factor in shaping our faith, because the faculties that create it are flawed. Our physiology cannot be allowed to overly influence the ultimate values of our lives. If it does become the final determinant to understanding our struggle, then that for which it was designed (e.g., safety, protection, and security) will become the chief end of our existence. We will become consumed with escaping danger or avoiding potential harm, exacerbating the symptoms typically associated with PTSD.

If our physiological reactions to perceived danger hijack our conceptual understanding of the problem, then anytime we feel threatened and experience the intense bodily responses to such perceived threat, our minds will become conditioned by this physiological reality in such a way that we will yield our lives to it with unfettered faith. We will begin to trust our impulses over anything else in the world and find ourselves lashing out in anger or collapsing under the grip of a mind-blowing panic attack. We will, in effect, be committing ourselves to a profoundly confused existential state in which the ultimate hope and glory for our lives is our own self-protection. To counter this trend we will need to remember that our bodies are broken by the influence of sin. Therefore we must acknowledge that even complex systems legitimately designed by God to protect us—systems that wield powerful physical influences on our bodies and minds—do not deserve the ultimate position of authority in our hearts. They can't be trusted indiscriminately.

Principles of Perseverance

1. I recognize that I am desperate for the grace of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit in this battle. I acknowledge the wisdom of Jesus, who said, "Watch and

- pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matt. 26:41).
2. I will seek God with expectancy to help me remember that my body (i.e., brain) is broken and marred by the influence of sin and the fall (Gen. 3).
 3. I must realize that Christ’s life is in me through the Holy Spirit and, therefore, as Jesus promises, new life and strength can and will affect my innermost being, right in the deepest places of my pain and trauma. (See John 7:37–39; 1 Cor. 6:19–20; Gal. 2:20. See also Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10.)
 4. I must realize that while my physical responses to a perceived threat feel legitimate, it is likely I am depending more on my own perception and wisdom than on the wisdom offered to me by God.
 5. I will seek God with expectancy for the strength and discernment to walk wisely in my brokenness. I will pray that my faith in the Lord (not my body) will begin to control my perceptions and responses in this fallen world.

THE NEED FOR SOUND WISDOM AND DISCRETION

PTSD should not be considered exclusively a psychiatric disorder or a biological issue. Actually, viewing it as such would be quite limiting to the process of healing and ultimate holiness. In essence, the struggles associated with PTSD are existential in nature. What I mean by this is that PTSD has much to do with one’s view of existence and being in the world. This brings our conversation into the arena of theology and philosophy and circumvents the idea that it is a mere biological phenomenon. The fear of death or losing control, the rage that bursts forth from the soul due to a perceived or actual threat, is a human response to danger. While it is a seemingly uncontrollable biological

response, in part it is a response of the soul. While this booklet is not intended to minimize the diagnosis of PTSD, it *is* an attempt to explore the existential realities underlying this struggle. And for us to gain proper perspective on these realities, it will be imperative to consult Scripture as our basis for understanding self and our purpose and place in the cosmos.

In the end, healing from trauma will require a deep faith in something or Someone that transcends our finite existence. This is because on our best days, left to ourselves, our vision of reality is muddled as though we were peering through dark, faded glass (1 Cor. 13:12). This is the case even if trauma is not part of our lives. Our understanding and ability to perceive accurately is limited, and being traumatized magnifies these limitations. Hence our desperate need for eternal wisdom in order to shape a proper perspective! Consider these words from the book of Proverbs:

The LORD by wisdom founded the earth;
by understanding he established the heavens;
by his knowledge the deeps broke open,
and the clouds drop down the dew.
My son, do not lose sight of these—
keep sound wisdom and discretion,
and they will be life for your soul
and adornment for your neck.
Then you will walk on your way securely,
and your foot will not stumble.
If you lie down, you will not be afraid;
when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet.
Do not be afraid of sudden terror
or of the ruin of the wicked, when it comes,
for the LORD will be your confidence
and will keep your foot from being caught. (Prov. 3:19–26)

The author of this proverb is revealing to us the pathway wherein we can walk securely and lie down without fear. He is pointing us to a state of being where our sleep will be sweet and the Lord will be our confidence. And what does he point us to for such peace of mind? It is sound wisdom and discretion.

James shares something similar regarding the topic of wisdom. His words are poignant for the person who suffers under the vacillating impulses of anxiety, fear, and anger on the one hand, and desires to stop these emotions on the other. In the context of trials and suffering (James 1:2–4) he writes,

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. (James 1:5–8)

James makes it clear that when we face trials and lack wisdom we are not to rest in our own abilities or look inward to ourselves; rather, we are to open our hearts to Someone beyond ourselves. He calls us to open our hearts to God. When we do so, James tells us that God is generous to the one in need! The problem is not that he refuses to grant wisdom to his people. Instead, James points out that problems arise when his wisdom is offered and the one seeking help chooses to doubt rather than believe. James tells us that a refusal to embrace God's wisdom comes at a great price in that such doubting will create profound instability and extreme psychological confusion or, as he calls it, double-mindedness.

You may ask, "So all I have to do is seek God for wisdom and he's going to supernaturally insert that wisdom into my heart? Then my problems with fear, anger, and anxiety will be

solved?” That would be easy, wouldn’t it? However, it doesn’t work that way because wisdom comes from (or through) God’s Word, never in isolation from it. While God does guide our lives and hearts, the only assurance we have that we are receiving wisdom genuinely from God is that it is always conditioned and shaped by the Bible, the only foundation for all of life and our thinking. You see, God has already spoken divine wisdom into the world, and that wisdom has been revealed in the form of Scripture. So when we seek wisdom from God, the first place we should begin our search is the Bible.

It is certainly easy in our culture of self-help—with its plethora of books offering the latest tips on happiness and fulfillment—to minimize the wisdom of Scripture. To do so, however, is a destructive mistake. The words of the Bible are not intended for self-help but are given to reveal the selfless one, Jesus Christ. The Bible is not into self-help; it is into Jesus-help. It reveals Jesus. We are told, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). It reveals to us the One who reorients our hearts on a deeply existential level—the One who brings clarity to life and solidifies our purpose in the world. The Bible contains the very thoughts of the God who made us. It helps us see and live with God in view. It is itself the substance of life. *It must not and cannot be overlooked.* Consider just a few examples of how God esteems his Word.

First, the fatherly instruction of God to the people of Israel.

And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he

might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. (Deut. 8:2–3)

Or his command to Joshua:

This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. (Josh. 1:8)

And the enlightening description penned by the author of Hebrews:

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Heb. 4:12)

These verses describe the essential nature of the Bible for all of life. Our souls' survival depends on the Word of God! Our success in knowing and worshiping God depends on the sacred Scriptures. And our attempts to accurately understand ourselves in this world are realized only through this divine book. If, as the Bible claims, the Word of God is so significant, then our first step in pursuing wisdom should be to consult it as it applies to the struggles associated with PTSD.

THE WISDOM OF GOD IN CREATION

You may wonder why I'm mentioning creation in a book on PTSD. That's a fair question. Since PTSD is linked to the issue of well-being or the threat to our existence due to trauma, it is important that we first get our bearings in regard to a biblical

view of ontology (i.e., existence). To do so, we must begin in the beginning.

The Bible tells us that God's attributes, especially his eternal power and divine nature, may be understood "in the things that have been made" (Rom. 1:20). Creation points to God. The majesty of a mountain range or the dazzle of the sun setting beneath the ocean's horizon all point to the power and authorship of God. If you are reading this booklet and have the capacity of awareness that you exist and are reading this booklet, then this too points to God. Your very being screams, "God exists, and as such I am not the final reference point of reality!" Creation puts us in our place. We are not the center of the universe, though we have something in us (sin) that daily seeks to convince us otherwise. Creation points us to the Creator. It vividly reminds us that all existing things are centered in him (or should be)! As the psalmist eloquently exclaims:

Mountains and all hills,
fruit trees and all cedars!
Beasts and all livestock,
creeping things and flying birds!
Kings of the earth and all peoples,
princes and all rulers of the earth!
Young men and maidens together,
old men and children!
Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for his name alone is exalted;
his majesty is above earth and heaven. (Ps. 148:9–13)

All that you see every day exists for God's pleasure and glory! *You* were created for his pleasure and glory! Have you ever thought about that? Your life, your blessings, your heartaches, and, yes, even your trauma cannot be minimized as existing in

some type of void or impersonal universe. God has spoken to mankind through his Word, and when we understand our lives and existence in light of his Word, it is then that we begin to comprehend what actually is.

This view goes against the notion that “perception is reality” and exposes it as a severely misguided idea. Human perception is distorted reality, and without Scripture as our lens it is a profoundly fractured reality. Trauma will provide a powerful context for you to see life in a fractured way. It will set in motion all sorts of things within your heart that will compete with the glory of your Creator. Trauma will seek to disrupt your understanding of who you are in this world: a creature designed to bellow the glory of the living God with your entire being! Trauma is part of the fracture (suffering), but it is also a catalyst in deepening the fracture because the fears, thoughts, and beliefs that are part of our reaction to trauma have a strong tendency to distract us from the reality of God.

Recognizing the fact that we are creatures fashioned by the hand of God is a beginning point for mending the fracture in our minds (Gen. 1:27). While trauma creates confusion about our existence, understanding our place in the universe (i.e., God’s creation) reorients us to the fundamentals of our existence. Life did not originate with us, nor can it be properly understood with our finite understanding. Life is a gift from God. Our limited perceptions do not always capture actuality, because all reality hinges on the power and sovereignty of Another! Any one of us at any given time can badly misconstrue reality. We are entirely dependent on the full and perfect gaze of God. As he views reality, what does he see? If we do not seek a greater perspective than our own, then we have no hope to view our lives and circumstances accurately.

Our ideas do not dictate reality in the sense of determining it. Instead, there exists an objective reality in the cosmos, determined by the immutable nature of God. And while we

will never have exhaustive comprehension of it, since we see life as though peering through a dark glass (1 Cor. 13:12), God's Word is sure to serve as a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Ps. 119:105), offering the guidance and understanding we need to navigate this journey wisely and well!

The central and constant light that all of Scripture will shed on your path is that God and his glory will always need to serve as our greatest aim. We saw in the verse above that, as creatures, we must submit to the idea that "his name alone is exalted." Trauma rushes in upon this reality and makes it, at best, a secondary purpose in our lives. If we get this piece out of order, then the entire foundation of our understanding (both of ourselves and the world) crumbles into dust, leaving us to wade through the sinking sand shifting beneath our feet. And while most believers can say, "I know I'm a creature and am called to worship God," the challenge before us is to determine whether we live this out as though it were true. We may know the right answer, but are our hearts captured and thrilled by this reality? Has the brokenness we've experienced influenced us to minimize or doubt or even forget this truth? After trauma, if we hope to get our minds back on track, one of the most important goals to set for ourselves is to recall and embrace our ultimate purpose in this world while seeking God's wisdom to navigate the process of healing. We must contemplate our place in the world, as creatures designed to glory in Another, and begin to approach our life and struggles from this vantage point.

Principles of Perseverance

1. Read Psalm 148. Write down the verses/phrases that place God at the center of all praise. Recognize the purpose of all creation: praise to God! Is such praise your ultimate goal at this time? Why or why not?