

PHASE ONE: FACING REALITY OF BONDAGE

LESSON ONE:

We might present the appearance that everything is fine in our lives, but this is only the surface, like the visible part of an iceberg. Underneath there are all of the hurts and false beliefs we have tried to ignore. Rather than going to God for help in dealing with the pain, we use coping strategies to comfort, distract and protect ourselves – strategies that come from our attempts to control our lives and maintain a good image. Jer. 6:14 – “You can’t heal a wound by saying it’s not there.” Heb. 13:6, 1 John 4:18, 2 Peter 2:19, Prov. 14:12

NLF LESSON 1

THE UNIVERSAL PROBLEM

We’re here to address something that most of us have been avoiding for a long time. It’s really a problem that affects every person on the planet: How do I deal with the pain and damage that result from living in a fallen world? No matter the source of that pain and damage, we have to choose how to respond. Rather than deal with it, though, a common choice is to create the illusion that we’re doing just fine and can live on the surface without getting into the mess. Don’t go digging into the problem, pick a strategy that helps us keep it at bay. What will help us protect , comfort or distract ourselves from an ugly reality?

You may have heard this situation described as wearing a mask. It’s an attempt to look as though we have everything under control and have no problems, especially big ones. This is based on pride – being more concerned about our images than on getting well. The truth is that as long as we keep up these false images, it becomes that much harder to be honest. When we take off our masks, other people will be encouraged to take theirs off too, and more of us can experience freedom

This is hardly a new situation. In Jeremiah chapter 6, the prophet is telling the kingdom of Judah that the Babylonians are about to descend on them and carry the people away because they wouldn’t live according to God’s plan. They’d been given many warnings over the years and God was finally saying OK, it’s time to face the consequences. Instead of leading the people away from the path of disobedience, leadership had downplayed the seriousness of the situation. Jeremiah confronts this in verse 14: “They have treated superficially the broken wound of my people, saying, ‘Peace, peace’ when there is no peace.” The Living Bible translates this verse this way: “You can’t heal a wound by saying it’s not there.”

We handle this issue by promoting the impression that we’re managing things pretty well. We wouldn’t dream of admitting that we’re struggling with doubt, rejection, shame, guilt and condemnation. How do we usually respond to the question, “How’s it going?” Probably something that doesn’t let the other person get too close, like, “I’m fine.” We’re afraid of the reaction if we got honest

and started talking about the battles going on. And truthfully, how would we respond if someone was honest with us? It's a lot easier to just not go there.

This is where our coping strategies come in. Taking our cues from the world around us, we think if we just had this product, or ingested this substance, or had a new relationship, or controlled other people through anger, people-pleasing or isolation, or any other in a whole list of potential escapes, our problems would be solved. Proverbs 14:12 speaks bluntly about this: "There is a way which seems right to a man and appears straight before him, but its end is the way of death." You may think you're not doing anything that could lead to such a drastic end. But have you experienced a loss of trust, relationships, peace, hope, or physical, emotional or mental health? There can be death in every one of those areas and more. What we've been doing is basically like sticking a bunch of bandaids on a cancerous tumor. The devil also has lots of suggestions for ways to deal with our issues, but there aren't any real solutions in any of those scenarios.

Some of the damage has been done with words, spoken by us or to us by others. These words can be incredibly destructive and leave lasting scars that Satan loves to attack. One of his favorite tactics is to throw these hurtful words at us when we're in a difficult place. Someone may make a comment that takes us back to that painful place, even though they may have no idea of the power of their words to open the wound. James 3:8 says, "But no one can tame the human tongue; it is a restless evil, full of deadly poison." That may sound extreme, but verbal abuse and gossip can create false beliefs about ourselves that are long lasting. We may believe we'll never be good enough for God or anyone else, fearing rejection and judgment if we let anyone know who we really are. It's important to remember Romans 3:23: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." We're not the only ones who fail. God has the solution in Jesus.

We've been going to the wrong source for help and deliverance. We may have tried in the past to give it all to God. Somewhere along the way, we've decided that He's really not dealing with things in the right way or the right timing. We see the Israelites in this situation in Exodus. In chapter 25, God called Moses up to Mt. Sinai to give him the law for how the people were to live. Moses spent 40 days and 40 nights on that mountain. Meanwhile, did the people spend that time celebrating their deliverance from bondage to the Egyptians? Did they talk to each other about the great new life God was going to give them? Well, maybe at first. All we know is by the time the story gets back to them, they were tired of waiting and went to Moses' brother Aaron. In chapter 32:1, they tell him, "Come, make us a god who will go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." Aaron goes along with this and uses their gold jewelry to make the figure of a calf. The people look at this creation and declare that this is the god who led them out of Egypt. Then Aaron proclaims that tomorrow there will be a feast to the Lord. They're going to worship the calf just like they've worshipped the Lord.

Where did they get this idea? To them, God is very intimidating and unapproachable, so they let Moses have the contact with Him. They looked at the way their neighbors dealt with their own frightening gods and copied them. Because we're living in the time of Jesus as the source of salvation,

we see them as incredibly foolish. But let's remember that we've turned to our own solutions too. We may not call them gods, but have they become the things we turn to instead of to God?

God is ready to wipe them all out and start over again, but Moses intercedes for them and goes down to confront the situation. When questioned by Moses, Aaron's response is found in verses 22-24: he blames the people for everything, even denying responsibility for the calf that "came out" of the fire. Have we ever made lame excuses for the results of our bad choices? I sure have.

We know the Israelites had a long history of ups and downs in their relationship with God and God sent Jesus to be the final solution to this universal struggle between our will and God's loving plan. We find ourselves right in the middle of this same battle for who will be in charge of our lives. Paul talks about this struggle in Romans 7:15. "For I do not understand my own actions (I am baffled and bewildered by them). I do not practice what I want to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate (and yielding to my human nature, my worldliness – my sinful capacity)." That's from the Amplified translation. He's saying that he knows things haven't been made right by his choices, but he just can't stop making them. That sounds all too familiar for most of us.

We may have tried to get out of this cycle before, relying on our own willpower. New Year's resolutions are a good example of this. We identify those pointless behaviors that haven't worked and come up with new ones to take their place. They might work for a while, but then we slip up and find ourselves right back in the old ways. This just reinforces the belief that we're doomed to failure and it's not worth the fight, so we might as well enjoy ourselves. As long as we rely on our own strength and motivation, lasting change is impossible. And we still haven't dealt with the underlying issues.

It's important to acknowledge that we're not in this struggle alone. Just as God is fighting for us to succeed, there are other forces fighting for us to fail. Ephesians 6:12 tells us, "For we are not fighting against flesh and blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places." This isn't meant to paralyze us with fear but helps us recognize what we're up against. Satan intends to keep us feeling helpless and hopeless, but no matter how big he makes himself appear, he's not bigger than God! And God wants to use all of His resources to give us lasting freedom.

Our part is to begin with honesty. It's time to remove our masks, admit our brokenness and take steps to deal with the real nature of our hurts. It won't be accomplished at once, but God provides endurance for the process.

Francesca Battistelli expressed this situation so well in her song "If We're Honest". Listen to these words and see if you can relate.

Truth is harder than a lie. The dark seems safer than the light, and everyone has a heart that loves to hide. I'm a mess and so are you. We've built walls nobody can get through. Yeah it may be hard, but the best thing we could ever do...

Bring your brokenness and I'll bring mine, cause love can heal what hurt divides. And mercy's waiting on the other side if we're honest.

Don't pretend to be something that you're not, living life afraid of getting caught. There is freedom found when we lay our secrets down at the cross.

It would change our lives, it would set us free. It's what we need to be....if we're honest.

Scripture references

Jeremiah 6:14, Proverbs 14:12. Romans 3:23, Exodus 25, 32:1, 22-24, Romans 7:15, Ephesians 6:12