

### Impaired or Enlarged? [1]

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As I briefly observed my seat mate while we were buckling up prior to take off, I thought she appeared middle-aged and somewhat frazzled. She certainly did not seem to be the talkative type. "It will probably be a very quiet ride," I mused to myself. However, when the stewardess asked her what she wanted to drink, her answer stirred my interest and suggested otherwise.

"May I please have two vodkas and a tomato juice?" she responded. "I'd like to make myself a Bloody Mary."

Breathing a prayer, I ventured, "May I ask you, what does drinking an alcoholic beverage do for you?"

Making a guilty grimace my seat mate replied, "It takes all the tensions away that I have when I travel and need to face the crowds. In a few minutes I'll get this warm, pleasant sensation inside and all my worries and troubles will just melt away." As a dreamy look crossed her face she continued, "You see, I have a disorder called agoraphobia—I lock up with panic and tension when I'm in a crowd."

She went on to tell me her story. As a teenager in Peru, she had been traumatized by being kidnaped and then held hostage for ransom. She had come through the experience without physical harm, but inside she still had many emotional struggles.

It really felt like I was venturing further into dangerous territory, but I decided to risk it anyway—"Ma'am, I have a question. I'm a minister of the gospel and last night I preached from Proverbs 31. I was speaking about the subject of what people turn to for a solution when their emotions overwhelm them. I warned them about the dangers of strong drink and how it impairs the individual's judgment. I'd like to know from your experience if this is true?"

Opening my Bible, I offered it to her so she could read Proverbs 31:4-9. She slowly and thoughtfully read the words,

"It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine; nor for princes strong drink: Lest they drink, and forget the law, and pervert the judgment of any of the afflicted. Give strong drink unto him that is ready to perish, and wine unto those that be of heavy hearts. Let him drink, and forget his poverty, and remember his misery no more. Open thy mouth for the dumb in the cause of all such as are appointed to destruction. Open thy mouth, judge righteously, and plead the cause of the poor and needy."

After reading the passage she asked, "Now what was your question again?"

I explained that we all need something to turn to when our emotions bottom out and tie us up in knots, or when we feel that life is almost more than we can handle. "So here is my question, 'Is it true that alcohol impairs and distorts our judgment—that while making us feel we can

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Published on Berean Ministry (<https://www.bereanvoice.org>)

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handle our problems, it actually blinds us to the larger reality of life, and keeps us from feeling other people's suffering?"

"It most certainly is true," she replied, "And what's more, I really shouldn't be giving myself this little liberty today. It's just that I need the courage to face these two airplane flights and all these people."

But then she turned toward me with another question, "Are you telling me, that in all your life you've never had a drink of beer or whiskey? That's really amazing!"

"That's true," I said. "Our people have been taught to never even taste the stuff. But I'll admit, that a number of our people are on different types of psychotropic medications." Then I went on and risked yet another question, "Tell me, do you have any experience with psych meds; you know, the kind that people are given to help them deal with their emotional problems? You see, the reason for my asking is that many of our people are told by doctors that they need medications in order to handle difficulties of life. I'd like to know if that also affects people negatively?"

"I sure do have experience," she responded. "My struggles have taken me down that road as well. I have had about all the drugs which are available that are supposed to help people with emotional issues. And I have to say that they aren't much different than alcohol. They take effect in different ways, but they are actually designed to do the same thing. In fact, because of my experience I've become an advocate for individuals who are being medicated against their will."

She went on to explain how some people use medications to control other people who should actually be allowed to work through their negative emotions, with compassionate support. "Tell your people not to go down that road! There's no one out there who really needs medications" she asserted, "except for those who are on them and just can't stop taking them right away. Tell them that medications will impair their judgment of life."

## **Will we impair our brains?**

And so this conversation raises even more questions. Many doctors and even conservative ministers encourage people struggling with emotions to turn to prescription medications for the mind. May we consider the negative impact of this? What do the experts know about these medications? What are the long-term effects of taking this route for our emotional and mental struggles? The following is a brief summary of these findings.

First, though, let us ponder what Lemuel's mother told him almost 3,000 years ago. Consider the words she chose to describe the effects of alcohol. "Forget, pervert, forget, remember no more." It does not say, "Give your brain enlightenment and balance."

Like my seat mate on the plane, a person who uses alcohol to self-medicate can tell you that he chooses to drink because it makes him feel better about his problems. The tensions he feels inside temporarily melt away. Social awkwardness and other inhibitions disappear and the person feels good about himself for a while. He will often admit that it does not change his reality but rather it makes him feel different about his reality. In fact, using strong drink often makes reality much worse, but his negative reality no longer troubles him, while he is under its

influence.

Sadly, it is true that the new distorted reality also narrows an individual's perception about other people's problems—troubles and needs are of no concern to him. Lemuel's mother warned him that his ability to decide cases of judgment would be affected, especially where human suffering was involved. The sharp edge of living with eternal realities also fades; the will of God as written in the law subsides. Or to put it another way, the conscience is dulled and God's still small voice becomes quieter still.

A psychology team put it this way. "If people do feel better when drinking alcohol or smoking marijuana it is because they feel better when their brain is impaired. Psychiatric drugs are no different. The people who take such drugs may feel less of their emotional suffering. They may even reach a state of relative anesthesia. But to the degree that they feel better, it is because they are experiencing intoxication with the drugs." (1)

This thought often surprises people, because we have been led to believe that medications are actually medicine. In reality, medications that target the brain do not bring balance to any brain chemistry, nor do they fill some void in the neural pathways. Rather, drugs that are designed for the brain are actually created to **change** the normal brain chemistry, based upon clinical theories, not research facts.

The following is a quote from [foundationsrecoverynetwork.com](http://foundationsrecoverynetwork.com). "Every type of drug, no matter how potent or addictive, has some type of effect on the person using it. These effects can range from mild to severe, and can include both physical and psychological [or spiritual] symptoms. While each drug is different, one common effect of drug use is impaired judgment. Every drug side effect has the potential to be dangerous, but impaired judgment can be especially risky to a person physically, psychologically and socially. It is essential to use drugs with extreme caution, knowing that they can impair a person's judgment in multiple and sometimes unexpected ways."

Another quote from the same source: "The NIDA (National Institute for Drug Abuse) also describes the changes that occur in a person's brain while on drugs. The chemicals in the drug disrupt the communication system of the brain, changing the way it processes information by either acting like the brain's natural neurotransmitters, or by causing the brain to release too many neurotransmitters." (2)

Choosing this remedy for emotional or mental suffering is sometimes described as closing out communication between the two worlds we all experience. Each of us has an ongoing dialogue between the sensations we gather from our bodies and what we tell ourselves in our minds about our world. When our bodies fail to respond the way they should, or when we become aware that our bodies are not doing what we want them to, we choose a corrective choice. For example, if we feel dizzy, or shiver, or get the impression that we are not making sense to others, we stop and choose a response in order to correct that specific problem.

When the brain is impaired by alcohol or mind-altering drugs (prescription or street), that self-dialogue and correction is minimized or stopped altogether, depending upon the substance type and the level of ingestion. An alcohol-impaired person becomes decreasingly aware of his staggering steps or his self-centered conversation. He not only stops seeing the full reality around him, but he also stops sensing it within himself. It is common for the alcoholic to resist treatment because he has lost perception about how the alcohol is affecting his actions. Not

being aware of his actions, he is naive about his addiction to the substance. When he finally becomes sober he finds that he has “wounds without cause” (see Proverbs 23:29-35). This same self-blindness is also experienced, to one degree or another, across the whole spectrum of psychoactive medications.

How much of this impairment are we responsible for? Only God knows and only the judgment will reveal how He feels about all of this. What is the soul (mind) accountable for when the brain is under an impairment brought on by alcohol, psychiatric medications, or any other psychoactive substance?

If Lemuel had resisted his mother’s direction and chosen to self-medicate, he no doubt would have allowed the oppressed in his kingdom to suffer. He would have chosen a life with few inhibitions such as described in Proverbs 23:29-35. He would have come back to reality after a night of little or no self-awareness and wondered what all he had done during his drunken stupor. How much of this would he have been responsible for?

Another question about the impaired mind is this: “When our world is made smaller, what happens to our self?” Is it not true that a smaller world makes a larger self in comparison? Do any of us need to have a world where our personal story becomes more and more important and other people’s worlds matter less and less? **Is it not right to treat emotional distress the same way we do physical suffering?**

This is a question that is often asked.

When a person breaks a leg or suffers from a serious cut we readily seek medical assistance. Part of the remedy is to relieve the pain of the wound. So why would we imply that there are cautions in regards to seeking medical help for the emotional struggles of a broken heart, a malfunctioning mind, or for fears that seem to rage out of control?

Even more closely related to the situations of emotional agony are the physical conditions which affect our emotions. When a blood sugar condition is out of balance we know it will bring a mental instability. When hormones are involved or when there is a thyroid problem, we do not hesitate to seek medical help, even if it may involve chemical medications. We should make it clear here that when some physical organ of the body is not functioning properly, we believe the Bible supports finding medicinal relief.

So why not address emotional pain such as fear, worries, anger, distress, or grief from the same perspective? God’s Word clearly makes a difference. We all know of Luke, the beloved physician. Paul gave Timothy a medicinal remedy for a stomach problem. God’s Word gives place for physical remedies for physical problems. But in these cases the medicine enables or enhances the **functions of the body**.

Is this also the case when treating the mind with medications? Are minds helped because brains are enhanced or enabled? Do people find their way out of fear or guilt because their brains are sharpened by the drugs? The words of Scripture would show, and even many professionals would agree, that this is not the case. The facts of Scripture, science, and research clearly detail that in most cases, emotional help which is received through substance use or prescription drug use is, in reality, experienced as help because the brain is hindered and impaired, not because it is enhanced or enabled.

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This is why we see mind issues as an entirely different matter. The mind (heart or soul) uses the brain in this life, but the mind is first and foremost spiritual in nature. The brain is considered to be a physical organ, but the mind is not. God directs us to give care to our minds, but that care is supposed to come through biblical, spiritual enhancement. The command to be sober teaches us to establish boundaries on our thought life in order to experience peace and Christian victory. The biblical direction to speak to ourselves through songs is to help establish our mind's activity.

Promises in both the Old and New Testament focus on God's ability to bring peace to hearts that are in turmoil. "Great peace have they which love thy law: and nothing shall offend them" (Psalm 119:165). "And the work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance for ever" (Isaiah 32:17). The activity of true biblical worship is a wonderful mind stabilizer.

Jesus has both comforted and commanded us with His words, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid" (John 14:27). We also know the promise, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law" (Galations 5:22-23). "And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7).

This brings us to the other option regarding the seeking of help for emotional needs.

## **Will we enlarge our hearts?**

"O ye Corinthians, our mouth is open unto you, our heart is enlarged" (2 Corinthians 6:11).

The Apostle Paul is a great encouragement, perhaps most of all because of the tremendous spiritual legacy he left in his writings. We marvel at his example. When he met Christ on the Damascus road and surrendered to Jesus as Lord, he gave his life unreservedly to spreading the Gospel. Because of this choice Paul suffered unbelievable rejection and persecution. Several passages highlight what he endured, but one passage reveals the effects of the suffering—what that suffering did to his heart.

This is recorded in 2 Corinthians 1:3-8.

"Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ. And whether we be afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effectual in the enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer: or whether we be comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation. And our hope of you is stedfast, knowing, that as ye are partakers of the sufferings, so shall ye be also of the consolation. For we would not, brethren, have you ignorant of our trouble which came to us in Asia, that we were pressed out of measure, above strength, insomuch that we despaired even of life:"

In 2 Corinthians chapters 4 and 11, Paul gives us more insights into this account. He was repeatedly traumatized, one time even to the point that the persecutors thought they had

solved the problem of Paul once for all, as they left him for dead. But through this all, Paul believed that his suffering was for a grander purpose. “Our light affliction”, as he calls it, and which he tells himself is “just for a moment”, he understood as happening for the purpose of working “a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory”. In chapter 12 we have Paul’s thoughts recorded about a very private time in his life when he struggled, asking for a certain distress to be taken away. After repeatedly praying for God’s deliverance the answer was “No.”

“And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he [God] said unto me, my grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me” (2 Corinthians 12:7-9).

In short, Paul turned to God for his comfort. Then to give him comfort, God did not dull or impair Paul’s perception, but rather helped him see the big picture and gave him strength to endure through his distress. When Paul embraced the big picture and received comfort from God, his heart and world were enlarged. Through this experience, he was then able to connect with hurting people from many different walks of life.

When we hurt or go through what the flesh does not want, God often does something for our spiritual man that He could not do any other way. We may be brought to the edge of eternity where we may see God’s purposes more vividly. We may be brought to a fuller grasp of God’s grace and what it does for us. Thus our hearts are enlarged. By going through suffering we are brought into a more complete understanding of what others may be going through.

In 2 Corinthians 6, Paul again details what he went through for the church at Corinth. The list is intimidating—one could almost expect to hear him say at the end, “I am all worn out! I have no more patience for you!” But Paul rather exclaims just the opposite, “Our mouth is open to you, Corinthians, we are hiding nothing, keeping nothing back, and our heart is expanded wide for you! There is no lack of room for you in our hearts...”

One of the blessed outcomes for us is that our view of our self changes when our heart is enlarged to care for others. Is it not wonderful when our self-focus shrinks to lesser importance? When our needs, our hurts, and our thoughts are not the center of our attention anymore, but rather our emphasis is on what God is doing in the lives of others?

## We all experience suffering

All of us suffer. We live in a fallen world. People betray us. Events disappoint us. We may receive wounds, big or small, from both the church and the world. Sometimes, after we suffer long enough, the hurts and disappointments seem to add up to a great sense of disillusionment. No one would argue whether or not the suffering is real.

“For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body.” (Romans 8:22-23)

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During some seasons of life, many of us will struggle so much with pain that we wonder whether or not we will lose our ability to reason. Sometimes it seems like the hurts and wounds are so deep and last so long that we can no longer control our thoughts. Everything gets jumbled together until it seems almost as though we can no longer think clearly.

Maybe our struggle is depression. We feel so bad that we do not even want to get out of bed, much less face the public or our church family. The struggles of the mind affect our ability to face life with vigor and vitality. Job 3 is a good passage to read when we feel badly about life.

It is helpful to remember that it is God who created us for living on this earth. We did not create ourselves. We did not choose to live in a fallen world. God understood what we would be dealing with, even from the very beginning of time. The God who made us also assures us that we will not face temptations or struggles greater than we can bear (1 Corinthians 10:13). Just like He created us with controllable sexual desires or the ability to regulate our anger, so He also created us with the capacity to endure suffering.

Additionally, it is helpful to remember that Jesus understands whatever we face. He went through great human suffering and struggle. In eternity past He told the Father, "I delight to do thy will." Then when He walked on this earth and finally faced the cross in a physical body, He cried out in an appeal asking for a different path. "Oh my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me..."

## In conclusion, which will we choose?

Impaired? Enlarged? Which will we choose? There is no doubt that God will have us suffer during our earthly journey. And the suffering isn't only physical; some of the most challenging times we experience are in our emotional journey. We actually need this suffering, as it honors God, strengthens us, and helps us to more readily relate to others. But we still have a choice.

One option obviously leads to a narrowed view of life and a limited ability to serve others. The Bible teaches us that by choosing to see life from an eternal perspective, and to see God as being involved in our lives, that this helps us to see beyond ourselves and reach out to God and others. This also helps give us the ability to make a difference for eternity.

Which way will we choose? God's way or the world's way?

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