

When Christians are Divided

There is nothing more painful than a relationship breakdown. Here's how you can find healing and restoration when strife takes its toll.

It was one of the worst experiences of my life. I felt as if I were watching a train wreck in slow motion, and I couldn't do anything to stop it. A great friendship was breaking up.

We had been close at one time, but our relationship had become strained. Words of peace somehow got warped. Confusion and suspicion whispered lies. Then suddenly, a firestorm of words ensued. It was over.

If you've ever experienced the pain of an unexpected relational meltdown, you've probably encountered the spirit of separation. You are not alone. Relationships in the church are under attack. The last decade has set records for divorces and separations, even among Christian leaders—and in the midst of headline-grabbing revivals.

Thankfully, God is revealing the way this spirit operates and how it can be shut down. Though its power is real, the spirit of separation is no match for an equipped, humble and prayer-filled Christian. If you learn to recognize and defeat it, you won't fall prey to its ploys.

To deal with this enemy, we must look to the Word. Scripture describes the defeat of a spirit called Leviathan: "In that day the Lord with His severe sword, great and strong, will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan that twisted serpent; and He will slay the reptile that is in the sea" (Is. 27:1, NKJV; see also Ps. 74:13-14, 104:24-26). Though there are a number of theories about what these verses describe, most scholars have linked Leviathan with the Nile crocodile.

But Leviathan is clearly more than a crocodile. Isaiah sees

him as a spiritual enemy; a supernatural serpent that must be defeated.

Throughout Scripture, serpents and dragons symbolize the work of Satan. Leviathan's crooked path can be traced from the serpent in Eden to the dragon of Revelation. Thank God, we've been given authority "'to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy'" (Luke 10:19). In the end, Leviathan is slain.

Twisting the Truth

Leviathan's clear mission is to destroy the lives of God's people by dividing them in subtle ways. The name Leviathan comes from a root word that means "to twist."

Like the crocodile, Leviathan approaches its prey slyly, just under the surface. When the moment is right, it strikes explosively with one aim: to take hold of its victims and twist them apart. Here's an example of how this spirit works:

Ray and Susan came to New Life Church with high hopes. Their first service was refreshing. They were warmly welcomed and saw great love and humility in the pastor.

Before long, Ray and Susan were heart-deep in their new church home. Ray was delighted: "I'm so glad we found this church. It's perfect!"

Subtly, however, Ray's assessment began to change. One Sunday Pastor Peterson gave a report about a recent outreach that bothered Ray. He couldn't put his finger on the problem, but he kept thinking: He's taking credit for what God is doing. He wants us to think he is responsible for the souls being saved.

Soon Ray was persuaded that Pastor Peterson had a spiritual problem. Susan disagreed, but Ray kept noticing problems until everything about the church he had once loved irritated him.

Ray set up a meeting with Pastor Peterson. Ray was

intimidating, judgmental and harsh. The stunned pastor couldn't reason with him, no matter how he tried. Ray's views were twisted and disconnected. Susan just looked down in shame.

Ray refused to pray with his pastor. "I think it is best for us to part ways," he said. "I don't know what we ever saw in this church."

Within a year of their leaving, the couple's marriage began to crumble. Words were warped, communication was strained and hearts grew hard. Ray and Susan separated, and eight months later they divorced.

Why does the enemy target relationships? Because our connections with one another are critical, delivering the love and power we need to fulfill our destinies. Paul describes the joints in the body of Christ as keys to our supply (see Eph. 4:16). Dislocated spiritual joints are painful and disabling to our unity and growth as the church—a real coup for the enemy.

Word-twisting is central to Leviathan's operation. David complained of his enemies, "All day they twist my words" (Ps. 56:5).

The serpent defeated Eve by twisting God's words. "Did God really mean that? You won't die if you eat of the tree" (see Gen. 3:4-5). Adam and Eve were quickly separated from God, and the fallout was devastating.

Separation attacks relationships subtly. A wife wonders, What did my husband mean by that? With the right amount of demonic spin, confusion and suspicion can be sown even between the best of friends.

The enemy twists what we hear just a little bit more each time, and if we don't discern his tactic, relationships often dissolve. The apostles themselves fell prey to a spirit of

division and parted over unimportant matters (see Acts 15:36-40). The rhythm is always the same: Twisting and separation, twisting and separation—and you never see it coming.

Pride Divides

The book of Job teaches us more about Leviathan. In the early chapters, Satan seeks God's permission to take Job's wealth, health and family, and ultimately causes him desperate pain. Job is so devastated by his losses that he wishes for "those who are ready to arouse Leviathan" to curse the day he was born (Job 3:8). He's referring to enchanter's who worshiped the crocodile spirit named Leviathan, summoning curses and chaos. Thousands of years later, Leviathan is still a presence in the literature and practices of Satanism.

Around the time Job speaks this unwise lament, his friends show up to comfort him. They find him sitting on a pile of ashes, covered with boils. Stunned by the sight, Job's friends weep and remain speechless for days. <

When they find the courage to speak, their pious words backfire and create a rift. But the problem was not with Job's comforters alone.

In his pain, Job had become self-righteous. Defending himself and overplaying his own righteousness, he denies that there is any sin in his life at all. Then he brazenly demands a hearing with God! He loses his spiritual perspective as well as his connection with those who came to show him love.

Near the end of the story, Job gets his hearing, but God doesn't coddle or justify him. Instead, He rebukes Job: "'Where were you when I laid out the foundations of the earth?'" (38:4); "'Would you condemn Me so that you can be justified?'" (40:8). The trait God is highlighting in Job by these questions is one that often keeps people from being healed and restored after loss: self-righteousness. "I didn't

do anything to deserve this, God! It's You and Your people who are wrong!" Our pride creates a wedge in our relationship with God and His people, just as it did with Job.

Job 41 contains God's closing argument. He outlines Leviathan's frightening arrogance and destructive nature. Leviathan's scales are his pride (v. 15). His heart is as hard as stone (v. 24). He is king over all the children of pride (v. 34). God is saying: "Job, look at yourself. Pride and pain are ruling you and twisting your perception. Like Leviathan, you've become twisted, hardened and irreconcilable." God's words shook Job. He saw the problem in himself, and the recognition of it broke him. In the next chapter, Job repents of his pride and is restored based on his willingness to reconcile with his friends: "And the Lord restored Job's losses when he prayed for his friends. Indeed the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before" (Job 42:10).

Humility Restores

When pain and loss pierce us, wounds can settle in our souls. The enemy plays off these wounds and creates separations in our families, churches and networks. He twists words, distorts intentions and prompts us to react out of pain instead of love. The result is always a train wreck.

Pride is the problem. When we justify ourselves, pride hardens our hearts and deceives us (see 1 John 1:8). If we buy into the lie that we have no sin, the twisting begins and division takes hold before we know what's happening.

Leviathan can be defeated only if we walk in humility. When we let the Lord reveal our pride, we can turn from it and be free. Humility creates an atmosphere around our lives that is toxic to separation.

Leviathan can't breathe the oxygen of grace. If we refuse pride, even when we are hurt, the spirit of separation will be starved out of our lives. Here's an example of what I mean:

To Gary it seemed to come from nowhere. He had made what he thought was an innocent remark to Jennifer at their family's Thanksgiving dinner. But Jennifer had exploded and run from the table angry and crying.

Pressures had been building in their marriage, and Gary was becoming uneasy. It seemed that everything he said lately was misunderstood. When he tried to reason with Jennifer, she became defiant.

Her reaction tempted Gary to respond in anger and self-defense. However, he asked his friends and family at the table to pray with him instead. After a few minutes, they all felt a release.

When Gary went to Jennifer she was crying, but the hardness was gone. "I'm sorry, Gary. I've been having such angry thoughts. I've been offended, and it has made me miserable. But something lifted off me just now. I feel peaceful."

Gary let out a sigh—part praise, part relief—as he realized he had his wife back. If you are involved in a relational conflict, God may be speaking to you about pride, as He did to Job. Repent and pray for those with whom you struggle.

Don't feed separation with anger and self-righteousness; starve it out. Let the Lord restore your losses and give you a double-portion reward.

If losing a friendship was one of the worst experiences of my life, seeing it restored was one of the greatest. It feels good to be reconciled and to enjoy laughing with my friend again. God has healed our hearts, and we are free from the grip of the spirit of separation.

Since that relational train wreck happened in my life, I've learned a lot about separation. I have seen that pride born of hurt is fertile soil for Leviathan's seeds. I have also come to understand that we can protect ourselves from division with

the clothing of humility (see 1 Pet. 5:5). Best of all, I've learned that God will restore when we get our hearts in order.

So don't allow the enemy to bring division into your life. Be aware of his tactics, walk in humility and trust God to order your relationships aright.

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