

Vulnerable – Closed. Trust in God

A key element of the definition cited by Fiona is ‘openness or susceptibility to attack or harm’. Fiona has provided a number of Scriptural examples of vulnerability so it might be useful for us to consider some everyday examples of vulnerability focusing on the part of the definition quoted above. It doesn’t matter how old we are, we can all be vulnerable – children, young people, middle aged, older age – and every age in between. Unfortunately, what happens sometimes is that some people may recognise personal vulnerabilities (openness) within others and try to exploit them.

Characteristics of vulnerability

There can be a number of different characteristics of vulnerability. Some are:

Fear of rejection. In this, we might, at any age, become concerned that our actions or thoughts may be rejected. This may cause us to act differently, to suppress expressing our needs or feelings relating to what we know to be right. This can lead to people recognising this as a ‘weakness’ in us. They can become encouraged to take advantage of this vulnerability for their own purposes.

Low self-esteem. This involves us in feeling inadequate sometimes resulting in others controlling us and taking us in directions we do not want to go. We might judge ourselves harshly and consequently not achieve what we are capable of achieving.

Need for external validation. This can take the form of us wanting to seek approval from other people for anything we might say or do. This can involve wanting praise or approval from others which, in turn, can result in us not doing what we believe is necessary.

The result of these characteristics is that people may become closed and defensive. This can lead to the reduction of a Christlike character.

Examples of vulnerability at different ages and circumstances

- It should be noted that the above-mentioned characteristics of vulnerability can be observed in people at any age.

Children may be vulnerable if they are constantly criticised by their parents or siblings in their homelife – examples might be inadequacies in contribution to home family life, poor achievement in school, and social inadequacy. In order to gain greater self-esteem, they may be susceptible to engaging in activities (which may be antisocial) that will bring them into greater repute with others whose activities might be undesirable.

Young people might strive for acceptance through engaging in peer group activities that might be morally and socially questionable. (“But everyone does it!”) If they do not feel secure at home, they can become vulnerable to engaging in these less desirable peer group activities.

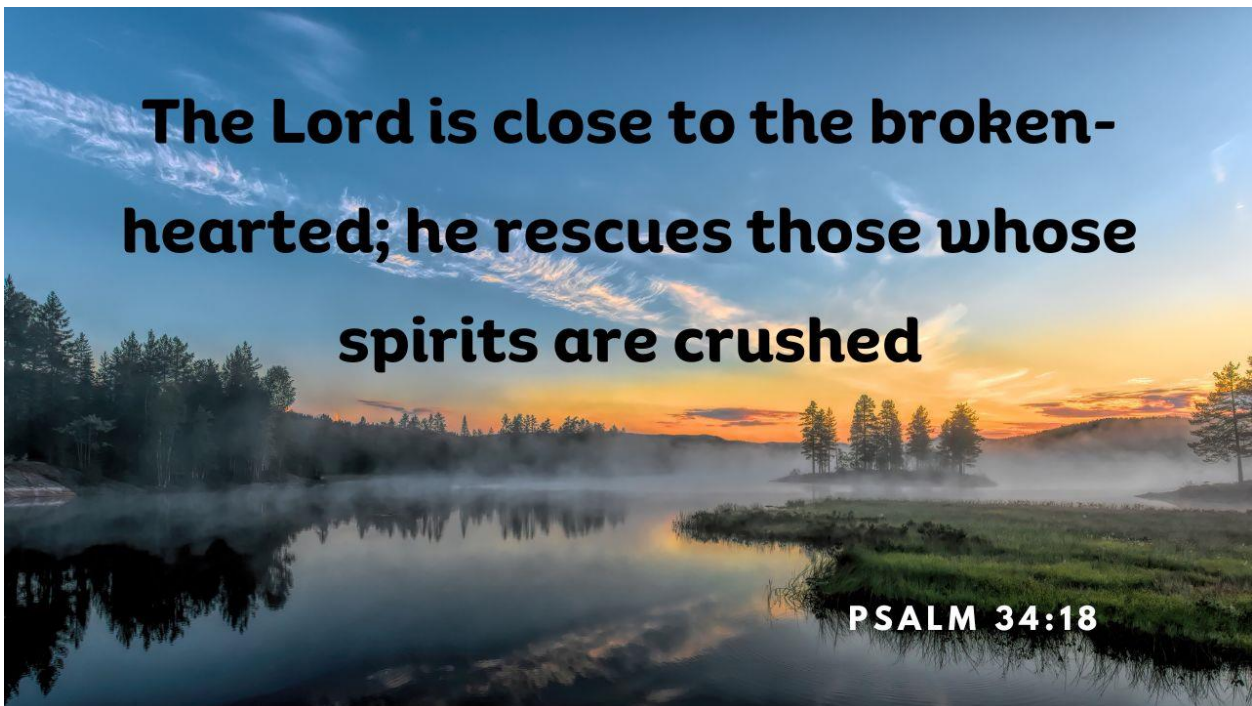
Middle-aged people who may be married and have children may become stressed through deteriorating family relationships – husband and wife, siblings – who do not live together well and/or have difficult financial circumstances. These people may become susceptible to irrational behaviour which can worsen the situation.

A very specific form of vulnerability can be associated with **older people** who may not be robust in their physical or cognitive powers. Unfortunately, there are many examples of this when this ageing trait is manipulated by younger people, especially in their family. For example, an older, frail person may become convinced by family to enter an aged care home before they really need to, thus losing their independence and causing distress for the older person. The family may convince the older person to use some of their personal finance for family reasons and may use emotional blackmail to achieve this. This ‘blackmail’ could involve such a statement as “But you don’t care”, or perhaps the family will cease to visit the older person. Such actions show a complete lack of respect for the older person. They are vulnerable because they may not have the emotional strength stand up against this kind of emotional bullying.

Broad vulnerability

Another element of vulnerability is related to our physical ability to cope with our living circumstances. For example, if we are of a weak physical disposition, we are vulnerable to illness or falling over.

Probably one of the most important potential problems is our vulnerability in our relationship with our Heavenly Father. Are we susceptible to losing focus on this relationship? What might be a reason for this? Perhaps we have not been getting our daily spiritual food (reading the Scriptures) that is resulting in spiritual malnutrition? Perhaps we are not praying as much as we need – (You'll notice we have used the word 'need' here. We have avoided 'should', or 'want'. The implication is that we are in constant need to pray to our Father – if we don't, we become vulnerable to losing our best direction.) We have a constant need to recognise His grace in our life. We learn more of this through constant reading of the Scriptures and continual prayer and being open to fostering a closeness with our Heavenly Father.



What is a good way to cope with vulnerability?

The first way is to recognise our need for continual prayer and communication with Him to ask for His guidance. We have assurances in Scripture, and through observations of our life, that to overcome fear of rejection, low self-esteem and feeling the need for external validation, it is most important is to place our trust in Him. He will always guide us. It doesn't matter what others think – it is God's direction that matters.

Psalm 121 is one of the best complete passages of Scripture that reassures us that God will guide us. "The LORD will keep you from all harm— he will watch over your life." (v.7)

The prophet **Isaiah** continues with a similar theme. "The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame." (Isaiah 58:11)

The wise man in Proverbs suggests that we need to accept personally that God will guide us - "In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths." (Proverbs 3:6)

The Apostle Paul prays that the Thessalonians would be guided by God – "May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance." (2Thessalonians 3:5).

And then there is the assurance in **Psalm 34:18** – "The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit".

What is a good way help others who are vulnerable? A positive slant on vulnerability.

If we have the opportunity, we might try to help the person gain more self-esteem by emphasising to them their value to themselves, to others and to God. Part of overcoming vulnerability is to help people feel **empowered** to make decisions for themselves rather than feel that they are incapable of making decisions. Prayerfully, these decisions will be guided by God.

Secondly, Jesus always helped and protected the vulnerable. We are called to do the same. Paul says that pure religion is to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction (suffering/vulnerability/poverty – whether spiritual or physical).

Practically:

- We should be respectful to the other person and not be dismissive of their vulnerability. In other words, even if you don't understand why they are feeling vulnerable in a situation, it is still real, valid and difficult for them.
- We should try to build on our relationship with them, so that they feel confident in what we say and do;
- We should encourage them to make their own decisions, and, if possible, pray with them about those decisions;
- We should respect their decisions about their own life, even if we disagree with them (because they are responsible to God for their life choices); and,
- We can try to help them understand their own strengths and weaknesses without being judgmental and superior;
- We should show these characteristics ourselves in humility and encourage others to show them as well since if God be for us, who can be against us?

A positive slant on vulnerability

Vulnerability can sometimes have a positive effect in a person. For example, it may be that a friend of ours is vulnerable to listening to new ideas. We could use this opportunity to help them understand more of God's Truth. Essentially, though, this must involve letting them make decisions about their path before God for themselves. Our role would be to provide them, with God's guidance, with the information needed for them to make an appropriate decision.



Being vulnerable in a relationship – genuinely open and honest with another person we trust – can make us susceptible to being hurt or rejected on one hand, but on the other hand it can truly deepen a relationship if the other person respects the ‘real’ us and returns the trust. The ultimate example of this is our relationship with our Heavenly Father who loves us beyond all reason and in whom we can place ultimate trust. The more open and honest we are with Him, the deeper our relationship with Him will be and the bigger impact He will have in our life. May God bless us as we grow our relationship with Him in vulnerability.

Conclusion

We have only touched the tip of the vulnerability ice-berg in this short article. It is important that we listen carefully to those we suspect may be vulnerable in a situation and pray for their guidance and ours, in helping them believe in themselves and in God’s love and help.

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