

Cycle of Spiritual Formation

“For to me to live is _____” (see Philippians 1:21)

We fill in the blank with what we most desire for joy, satisfaction, and fulfillment. Even when we know the Biblically correct answer, our response *in the moment* can indicate a very different answer. Note that some of the answers can seem good and valid:

- “For to me to live is winning this argument with my spouse.”
- “For to me to live is to have a healthy, happy family.”
- “For to me to live is the pleasure from this pornographic video.”
- “For to me to live is to work hard to provide financial stability.”
- “For to me to live is the financial gain from this dubious business deal.”
- “For to me to live is to have a good reputation and friends who respect me.”
- “For to me to live is to vent my anger at the incompetent store clerk.”

Think Movement

How does the Spirit of God move in a person’s life? How does real, deep, heart-level change happen? How do we move past simply changing our external behavior? Change begins with brokenness.

Brokenness opens our eyes to see where repentance is needed, when we see that we fill in the blank with something other than “Christ.” Brokenness is the response when we recognize our self-obsession and long for our lives to reflect God-obsession.

Self-obsession: Nothing matters more than my comfort and convenience at any cost to others.

God-obsession: Nothing matters more than displaying God’s character to others at any cost to myself.

Brokenness is over sin, not over pain. Brokenness is not about how wounded I am and how much I want relief. Brokenness is about my longing to replace self-obsession with God-obsession.

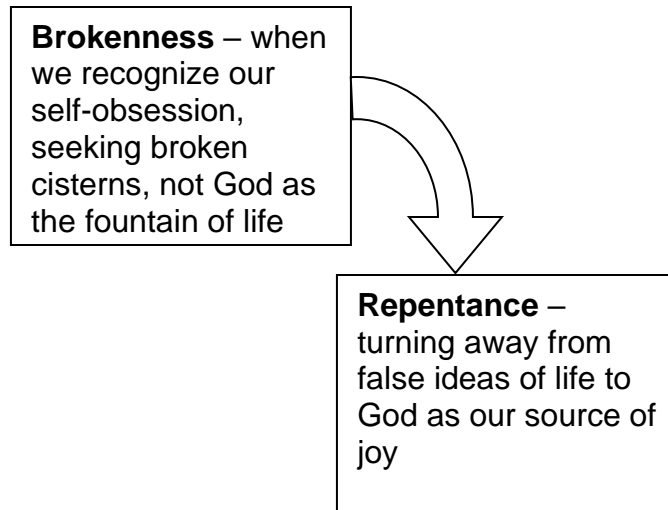
<p>Brokenness – when we recognize our self-obsession, seeking broken cisterns, not God as the fountain of life</p>

True brokenness begins when we see our self-obsession. Brokenness opens our eyes to what we need to repent from.

True **brokenness** recognizes our sin (and our sinful condition) and our hopelessness apart from God's supernatural work in our life. That brokenness leads us to repentance that is more than the familiar "turning around from sin" and trying harder.

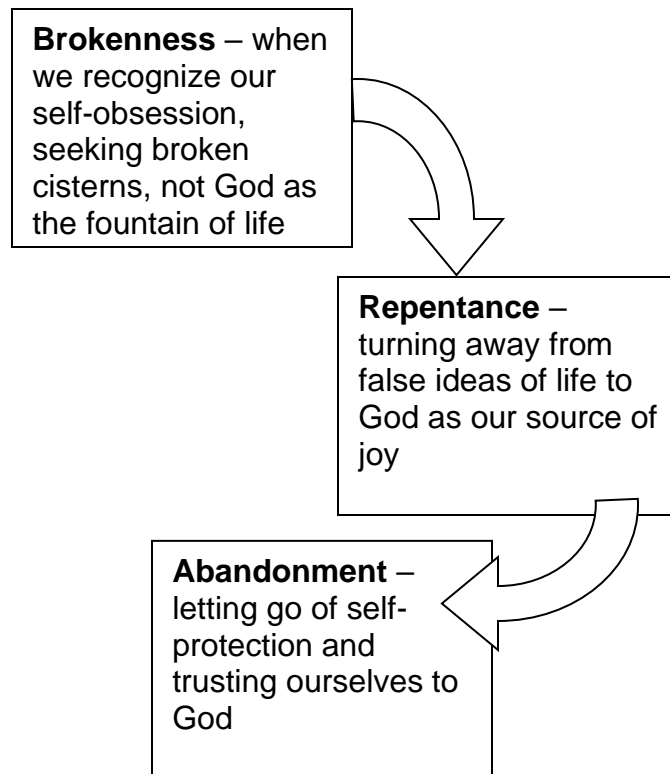
[Adapted from *Guide to Soul Care*, NewWay Ministries, 2006]

Genuine brokenness leads to repentance.



It is a **repentance** that confesses our root problem of self-obsession and our powerless state in our own efforts. The result of repentance may include changed behavior, but the deepest difference is our abandonment to God, our renewed and continuing desire to replace our second-things passions with God-obsession.

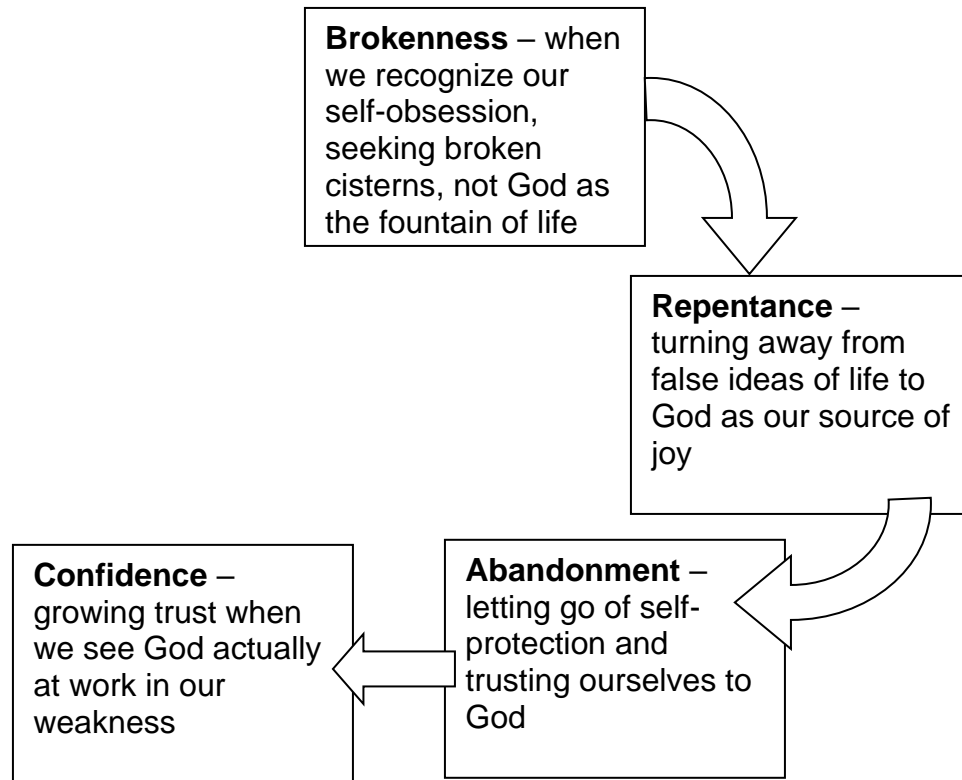
Repentance takes us to abandonment.



That **abandonment** means depending more and more on the Living God for our fulfillment and joy and satisfaction as we see the futility of reliance on any second thing in His place. Abandonment produces a confidence that reflects the self-abandonment of Jesus to His Father's trustworthiness.¹

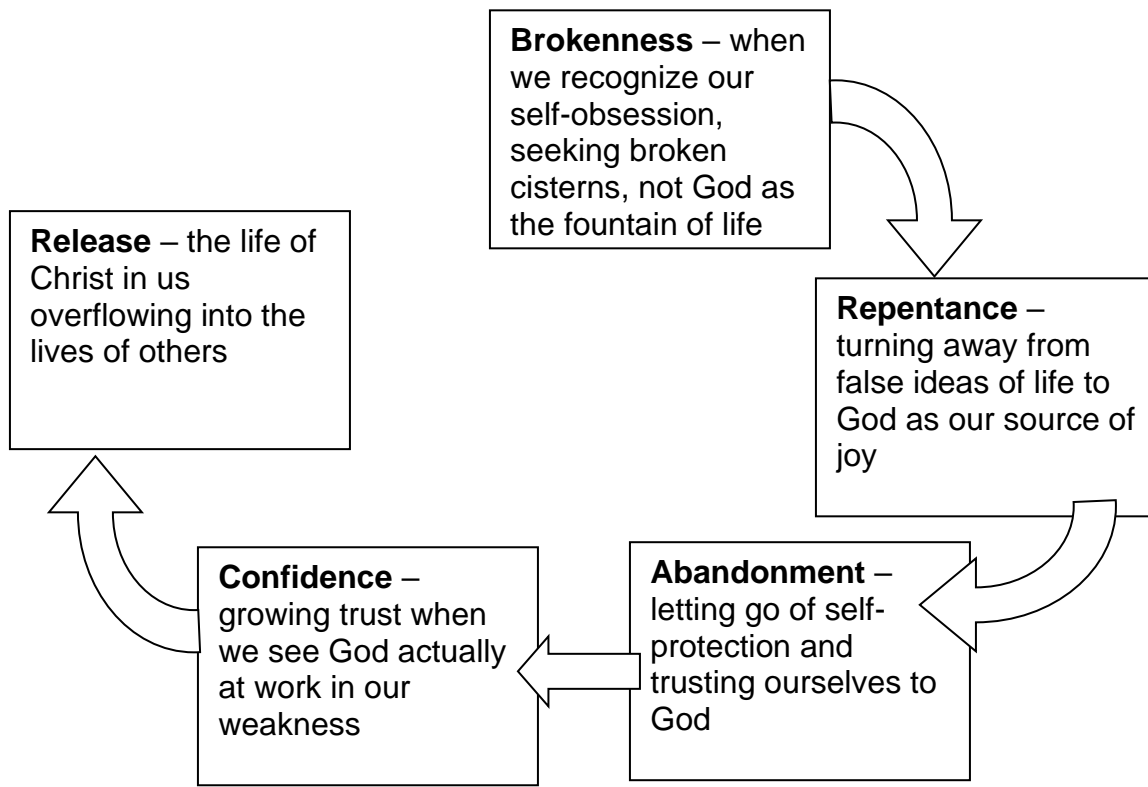
¹ 1 Peter 2:21-23.

Abandonment leads to Confidence.



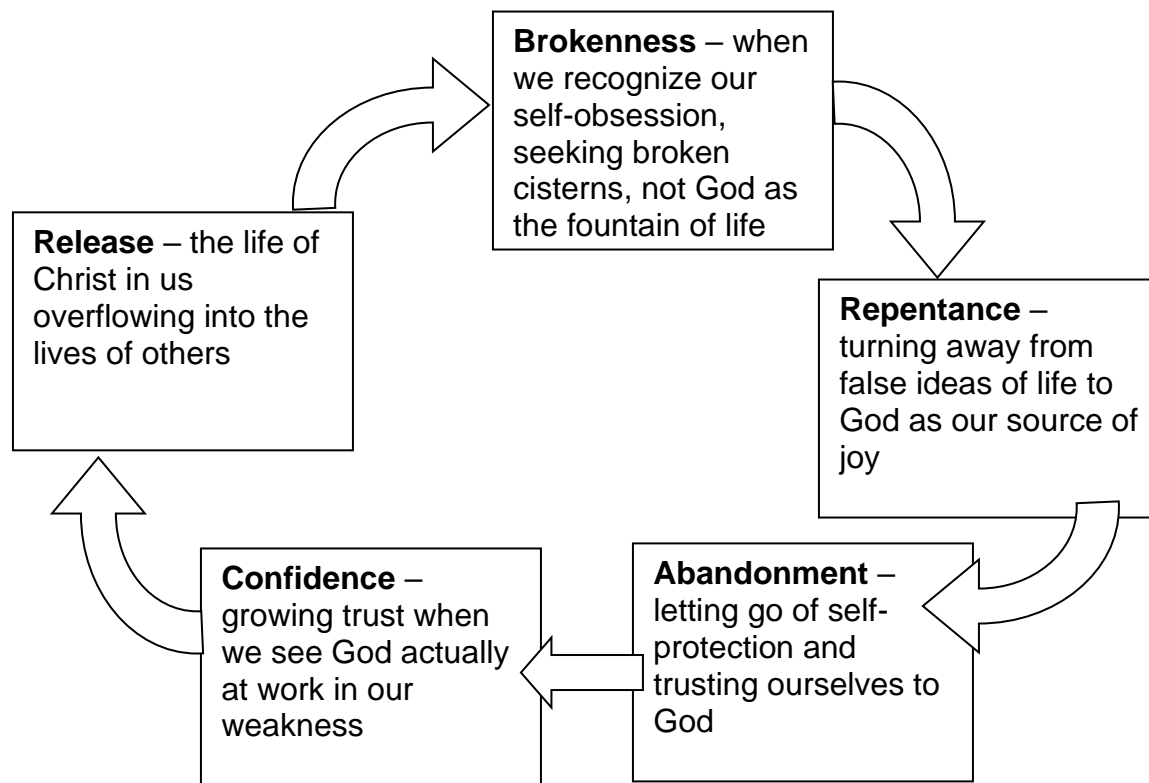
Our abandonment results in **confidence** in God's resources rather than our own. We really can find fulfillment and satisfaction in the God who is in sovereign providential control of all of our circumstances. We can have confidence in the God who loves us. That confidence in His goodness and faithfulness enables us to more fully depend on Him regardless of the blessings or difficulties we happen to be facing. Our joy is not in comfort or even relief from pain, but in Him.

Confidence in God's resources brings Release, freedom and rest in Him.



That confidence provides **release** that frees us to live without the pressure to manage circumstances and manipulate people to improve our situation. When second-things blessings are our highest desire, we spend every waking moment managing and manipulating circumstances and people. We are always on guard lest our actions or someone else's jeopardize our blessings. We can be so self-obsessed that we never imagine the freedom of not needing to be continually on guard. Brokenness begins to turn our attention away from our self-efforts and toward the beauty of the Lord, free from that constant self-protection. The release described in the final phase of the cycle launches us into that freedom. The attraction of brokenness, repentance, abandonment, confidence, and release draws us to see the beauty behind brokenness that we so often try to avoid. The release frees us from the self-obsessed management of circumstances and manipulation of people.

The release to enjoy the life of Christ flowing through us makes us more aware of and sensitive to the obstacles and distractions in our hearts that continue to get in the way of our freedom and rest in Him. That recognition leads us back into the continuing cycle, back to brokenness over our sin. The cycle continues until, in glory, there are no more obstacles and distractions.



Repeating the cycle our whole lives can seem discouraging until we remember we are part of a larger story. Even though our part in the story is hard at times, we can look forward to the ending we know is coming. When the story concludes, we won't want to forget the difficulties. We will see how God was at work and rejoice.

We're living the true story of real consequences in a complex, gripping plot. Once we reach the happy ending, we'll want to read it again and again.²

For more on the Cycle of Spiritual Formation, see *Soul Talk*³ and *The Pressure's Off*⁴ by Larry Crabb.

² Janie B. Cheaney, "Dreamers with deadly dreams," *World Magazine*, July 1, 2024

³ Larry Crabb, *Soul Talk* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 235.

⁴ Larry Crabb, *The Pressure's Off: There's A New Way to Live* (New York: Waterbrook, 2018), 180.

Consider the Cycle of Spiritual Formation from the perspective of James 4:4-10.

You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us? ⁶ But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says:

“God opposes the proud
but shows favor to the humble.”

⁷ Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

