



Deadly Perils of the Victim Swamp: Bitterness, Self Pity, Entitlement, and Embellishment

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I. Introduction

Once the enemy has managed to bring about trauma in a person's life and to plant lies in the traumatic memories, his next priority is to prevent the wound from being healed. If a person "stands straight"¹ in the pain of being wounded as a victim, he is in a good place to receive healing. The pain motivates him to seek healing, and "standing straight" in the pain is a spiritual and emotional position "open" to the Lord's healing work. The enemy knows that he can prevent healing by luring a victim away from standing straight in his pain, and into the swamp of bitterness, self pity, entitlement, and embellishment. He knows that once he has lured us into this victim swamp, our own bitterness, self pity, entitlement, and embellishment will hinder any attempt to heal the original wounds. To return to the place where we can receive healing, we must confess and renounce these sinful patterns of thought and behavior, and then ask the Lord to free us from them.

Note: We use "victim" to refer to victims of intentionally hurtful perpetrators and/or to victims of non-perpetrator traumatic events (accidents, natural disasters, etc).² Despite the feelings commonly associated with it, there is nothing inherently shameful about being a victim³. It is not a character flaw to have been victimized – it is something we all experience at one time or another as a part of living in this fallen world. The problem begins when we get stuck in "victimhood." We slide into the victim swamp when we begin to take on "victimhood" as an identity, when we do things (like bitterness, self pity, entitlement, and embellishment) that prevent us from healing and moving on, that keep us stuck in the place of being a wounded victim.

II. Bitterness

The sins of the victim swamp have so much seductive power because they offer so many apparent benefits. It often feels like bitterness/anger helps me defend myself. As described in "Judgments and Bitterness as Clutter that Hinders Prayer for Emotional Healing," bitterness/planning for revenge gave me the feeling that I wasn't just a totally powerless victim –

¹We heard this phrase from healing minister and author Leanne Payne, at one of her Pastoral Care Ministries Schools. Some of her comments on it are found in her book *The Healing Presence* (Baker, Grand Rapids: 1989, 1995). See pages 58 and following for Payne's discussion of an image from C.S. Lewis of "bentness." (Thanks to Pete B. for finding this reference!)

²An interesting observation: When I am wounded by non-perpetrator traumatic events, I often see myself as a "victim" of God's negligence.

³*Lie-based* shame is a very common part of the subjective experience of being a victim.

like there was something I could do and that there would be justice some day.

Almost everybody recognizes bitterness as a deadly peril of the victim swamp. Many books have already been written about bitterness and forgiveness. Most books on prayer for emotional healing list bitterness as a common hindrance to healing. See Dr. Smith's section on "revengeful emotions" (Beyond Tolerable Recovery, p.93-96), his chapter on forgiveness (Beyond Tolerable Recovery, p.239-250), and "Judgments and Bitterness as Clutter that Hinders Prayer for Emotional Healing" on our web site, for resources that directly discuss the place of bitterness and forgiveness in Theophostic^{®4}-based⁵ ministry.

III. Self Pity

Self pity lurks in some corner of every heart, turning us inward, yet ironically, away from our true selves. It provides a strange form of comfort, even though it prevents real healing. I think we are all familiar with "feeling sorry for ourselves," and the way it "feels good," even as it blocks true healing and real solutions. This feeling is qualitatively different than that of honestly acknowledging one's pain. Self pity feels that "I have suffered far more and worse than others. I cannot possibly go on until somebody (God, the perpetrator, "somebody who ought to be in charge of these things") gives me a different life/undoes what happened." Standing straight in one's pain, by contrast, is to simply and humbly acknowledge, "I hurt – I feel _____ (*rejected, ashamed, scared, etc*). This thing happened to me, and I was wounded. This pain is part of the brokenness of the world which has affected me. I accept that this suffering has been part of my life, and I now want to let it go by the grace of God, and go on with my life."

Some people mistake denial of their pain as the avoidance of self pity. Denial says, "Other people had it worse, so I don't/shouldn't feel so bad," or "That event didn't hurt me; the past is the past, and I've gone on with my life" (but the evidence of the person's life shows that he still has lies rooted in that past event).

My experience with self pity has been very similar to my experience with bitterness. I can recognize it, confess it, repent of it, and renounce it, but I cannot free myself. However, whenever I pray the sample prayers below, acknowledging my helplessness and asking the Lord to free me, I experience immediate and dramatic relief.

IV. Entitlement

Victim entitlement tells us that we have the "right" to avoid responsibilities and consequences we

⁴Theophostic Ministry is a trademark of Dr. Ed Smith and Alathia Ministries, Inc.

⁵While we encourage folks to study the Theophostic[®] principles as taught by developer Ed Smith, we don't actually use them as a stand-alone model in our practice. We have therefore developed the term "Theophostic[®]-based" therapy/ministry to more accurately describe what we do, and how we use Dr. Smith's principles: We use the term "Theophostic[®]-based" to refer to therapies/ministries that are built around a core of Theophostic[®] principles and techniques, but that are not exactly identical to Theophostic[®] Prayer Ministry as taught by Dr. Ed Smith. Our own therapy/ministry would be a good example of "Theophostic[®]-based" therapy/ministry – it is built around a core of Theophostic[®] principles and techniques, but it sometimes also includes material that is not a part of what we understand Dr. Smith to define as Theophostic[®] Prayer Ministry (such as our material on dealing with curses, spiritual strongholds, generational problems, and suicide-related phenomena, and our material on journaling, spiritual disciplines, and medical psychiatry).

don't want, and the "right" to take things we do want: "I shouldn't have to carry the same kind of responsibilities others are expected to carry because my life has been so hard," "I have the right to act this way (*angry, violent, rude, unfaithful, etc.*) because of the things that were done to me," "It's okay for me to take this _____ because of all the things that were taken from me."

The sad truth is that we *are* "entitled" (have the right) to stay wounded, bitter, and miserable. Amazingly, the enemy often succeeds in convincing us to do this. We are also entitled to healing if we choose to release bitterness and self pity, and to embrace the Lord's plan for healing.

V. Embellishment

People often feel that the true source of their pain will not be recognized as valid by others, so they exaggerate their suffering in other events to ensure that their pain will be acknowledged somewhere. We sometimes think of this phenomenon as "(real) pain in search of a story." Our experience is that the traumatic memories that are the true source of pain are often repressed/dissociated/unrecognized to the point that the person receiving ministry is not consciously aware of them. Both the fear that the pain in these memories will not be validated, and the exaggeration of suffering in other events, are often subconscious. The problem with this phenomena is not that the person is trying to express his/her pain, but that letting the pressure out somewhere else makes it easier to continue hiding the true source of the pain. If we want permanent healing, we need to find and feel the deeper wound that is the true source of the pain. If we recognize and then release embellishment, the pain will stay where it belongs and the deeper wounds will be easier to find.

Embellishment provides a short term comfort similar to what we experience with self pity, even as it stands in the way of healing and growth. Both Charlotte and I have caught ourselves indulging in fantasies in which real difficulties in our lives have been embellished into tragic melodrama. Somehow the suffering and indignities we face seem to hurt less if we imagine them to be heroic instead of walking in the truth that we all face difficulties and challenges, and that the Lord is with each of us as we face the portion of suffering He has allowed to come our way. Embellishment is also "valuable" as an accomplice that increases the "leverage" for bitterness, self pity, and entitlement.

Common clues to the presence of embellishment (and self-pity) are statements that include "always," "everybody," "never," and/or "nobody." For example, "I *always* get the short end of the stick," "*Everybody* else got more than me," "God is *never* there for me when I really need Him" or "*Nobody ever* notices my pain." These words do not always indicate self pity or embellishment (for example, some people with profound rejection wounds have extreme core lies such as "*Nobody* loves me – I am unlovable"), but it is wise to keep in mind self pity and embellishment if the person receiving ministry makes "always/never" all-inclusive statements.

VI. Miscellaneous comments

Both self pity and entitlement get in the way of seeing and taking responsibility for our own sins. Unfortunately, this means that the more self pity and entitlement a person has, the harder it is for him/her to see. The problem is *everybody else's* fault! How could you *possibly* be suggesting that there is something they need to be doing differently? People who are the most severely infected by the victim swamp sins usually get very angry with me when I suggest that bitterness, self pity, etc. may be getting in the way of their healing. However, I have been pleasantly

surprised by how many are eventually able to acknowledge this painful truth, go through the sample prayers and commands, and then move on with their healing.

Both Charlotte and I have been sobered by how tempting it is to insist on what feels “fair,” even if it means staying in the victim swamp. This has been especially true when it comes to conflict in our marriage – “I shouldn’t have to pray the victim swamp prayers when Charlotte hasn’t even _____ (fill in the blank)!” We have learned to challenge ourselves with the motto “Do what’s right, not what’s fair.”

Bitterness, self pity, entitlement, and embellishment seem especially common in our relationship with the Lord. “I have been praying and praying for healing – if He wants me to get better, then why doesn’t He come down here and do something about it? I am perfectly willing to do my healing work, why doesn’t He just give me a break? I have the right to be _____ (angry, bitter, depressed, irritable, demanding, etc.) because God *never* takes care of me, things *always* go wrong.” When I am in the victim swamp, statements like these feel so reasonable, so true. I usually have to choose to go through the prayers by an act of will. I have begun prayers to confess and release the victim swamp sins with preambles such as: “I really don’t feel like saying this prayer at all. What I would really feel like saying is ‘Come down here and take care of Your children – come down here and do Your #\$\$%&@ job!’ The only reason I am saying these prayers is that I know (in my head) that this bitterness and self pity is a dead end street, I know (in my head) that it is blocking my healing, and I know I can’t get free by myself (this is usually the only part that *feels* true).” Amazingly, the Lord is very gracious, and answers even these outrageous prayers.

VII. Practical comments

Self pity seems to be an especially humbling sin to see and acknowledge in oneself, and entitlement and embellishment aren’t much easier. My usual spontaneous reaction, when Charlotte suggests that the wound we are working on may be infected by self pity, is to feel angry at her. I often feel defensive, like I have been “caught” doing something wrong. I also usually feel invalidated – like she is blaming me for the problem instead of recognizing how I was wounded by others. “How *dare* you imply that I am doing something wrong? Can’t you see that I am the one that got hurt?” It is important to realize that this material is a bitter pill, so that we can be helpful instead of judgmental when the person receiving ministry finds it hard to swallow. We would like to offer the following thoughts about how to help the person receiving ministry see and release these sinful patterns of thought and behavior.

- Best possible scenarios: Occasionally the person receiving ministry identifies the problem and asks for help: “I think maybe I have a problem with self pity - maybe it gets in the way of my healing. Could we do some kind of prayer for this?” This has not happened very often, but we are hoping that it will become more common as good material regarding the victim swamp sins gets written and published. Occasionally the Lord reveals the problem to the person receiving ministry. For example, after praying “Lord, please reveal anything that is blocking your healing work in _____’s life,” the person may comment “I just heard the words ‘self pity.’ I think that’s right – I need to deal with that.”
- Lead by example. Most of us tend to be gifted at seeing the victim swamp sins in others, and handicapped when it comes to seeing them in ourselves (Charlotte and I have certainly experienced this in our relationship). One of the most important things that we can do is to

lead by example. I usually start comments about the victim swamp by sharing about my own experience of being stuck in it. Please ask the Lord to reveal these sins in your own life, and go through these prayers for yourself, before using this document to help everybody else see their victim swamp sins.

- Be non-judgmental. It is very important to be free of judgment towards the person receiving ministry. My “judgment scanners” immediately go to maximum sensitivity when Charlotte suggests any of the victim swamp sins. Any judgment present is detected immediately, and makes it much more difficult for me to receive the truth of her concerns. If we are feeling angry and/or judgmental – frustrated at the person receiving ministry because his self pity is blocking the way, like we want to “hit” the person receiving ministry with this essay to make him see his victim swamp sins – then we need to deal with our judgment and triggering before discussing the victim swamp with the person receiving ministry. This is another good reason to address the victim swamp sins in ourselves first – discovering these sins in ourselves will help us be less judgmental towards others.
- Be non-anxious. Most people display some anger when I suggest that self pity, and/or entitlement, and/or embellishment may be hindering their work. It was very difficult for me to bring up the possibility of these victim swamp sins until I dealt with my triggers and fears about people getting angry with me. I would encourage you to look carefully for triggers regarding conflict/anger if you experience anxiety when suggesting the possibility of victim swamp sins.
- Address lies that are triggered during the discussion of this material. Our experience is that negative reactions in the person receiving ministry often come from core lies that are triggered by the discussion of the victim swamp material. It is very helpful (and sometimes necessary) to identify and resolve these core lies before going through prayers and commands to address victim swamp sins. One of my own Theophostic[®]-based sessions provides an excellent example. I was remembering and describing traumatic memories, and was wanting Charlotte to acknowledge how badly I had been wounded and to validate my negative emotions. This was during the time we were developing this material regarding the victim swamp, and Charlotte’s first thought was to wonder if self pity might be hindering my healing work. I felt profoundly blamed and invalidated, and was very angry: “How *dare* you imply that I am doing something wrong? Can’t you see that I am the one that got hurt?” We eventually figured out that her comment had triggered memories of being a white kid in the 1960’s in a liberal, mixed-race grade-school. The general philosophy was that white people were responsible for all the problems in the world, and that oppressed minorities were always the innocent victims. On my playground, this translated into feeling chronically blamed and invalidated. These memories carried the core lie: “I will be/am being blamed, discredited, invalidated – the sins against me won’t be/aren’t being acknowledged.”

Being blamed and/or discredited/invalidated is such a common component of people’s original victim experience that it is wise to check for blame and invalidation lies whenever the person receiving ministry experiences a negative response to the suggestion of victim swamp sins.

- Address guardian lies. As mentioned above, the sins of the victim swamp have so much seductive power because they offer so many apparent benefits. These apparent benefits translate into guardian lies. For example, a self pity apparent benefit guardian lie could be “It’s *not* okay to get healed (give up my self pity, tragic hero position) because then they will never

see or acknowledge how badly they hurt me;” an entitlement apparent benefit guardian lie could be “If I let go of this entitlement I will never be compensated for the injury I experienced;” a bitterness apparent benefit guardian lie could be “It’s not safe to let go of this bitterness – it makes me strong so I can protect myself;” and an embellishment apparent benefit guardian lie could be “The system isn’t fair, so the only way to get what I deserve is to cheat (embellish) like everybody else.” An easy way to check for guardian lies is to ask the person if they sense any uncertainty or lack of internal unity about going through prayers and commands to deal with bitterness, self pity, etc. Look carefully for apparent benefit guardian lies if the person receiving ministry is experiencing ambivalence about releasing any of the victim swamp sins. Help the person formulate any apparent benefits as guardian lies, and then hold them up to the Lord for inspection.

More than one location: Like bitterness, vows, and demonic infection, the sins of the victim swamp can be carried in a number of different locations. A person can carry sins of the victim swamp about several different memories and/or issues. Sins of the victim swamp can also be carried separately by different internal parts. You will need to deal with these victim swamp sins each time you deal with internal parts and/or traumatic memories that are contaminated by bitterness, self pity, entitlement, and embellishment. When evaluating whether prayers and commands have been effective, it is important to realize that resolving bitterness, self pity, etc. *associated with a specific memory or issue, or carried by a specific dissociated part*, is different than resolving the bitterness, self pity, etc. in *all locations*. When checking to see whether the bitterness, self pity, etc. are gone it is important to check the *specific target* that has been addressed. See “General Introductory Comments Regarding Ministry Aids” for additional comments.

Local strongholds, demons, and curses: My sense is that there are sometimes spiritual strongholds, demonic spirits, and curses that are connected to/associated with the specific occurrences of victim swamp sins that are being addressed, and therefore lose their protection/anchor when the victim swamp sins in question are resolved. In these situations it is easy and important to finish with commands to deal with the spiritual strongholds, demonic spirits, and curses that have just been exposed. I target the specific, local strongholds, demons, and spirits in question by including the local “address” in the commands. For example, “In the name of Jesus, we command that all spiritual strongholds connected to or associated with *this self pity regarding never being married* be torn down now.” See “General Introductory Comments...” for additional comments.

Systemic patterns of self pity, entitlement, embellishment, and bitterness: We have also observed that, in addition to being carried in multiple, specific, local infections, victim swamp sins can also be carried as a wide spread and deep seated *systemic* infections. It is important to watch for systemic self pity, entitlement, etc. because every local “infection” will be easier to deal with once the systemic victim swamp sins have been addressed. The first time someone deals with any give victim swamp sin is a good time to check for a widespread and deep seated pattern behind the immediate situation, but sometimes the systemic pattern does not become apparent immediately. Look especially for systemic patterns if the same victim swamp sins pop up over and over again. When you find systemic victim swamp sins, make sure to treat them with a full course of systemic “antibiotics.”

Systemic means:

1. Working with the adult core self as opposed to working with internal parts.

2. Addressing the wide spread pattern of the victim swamp sins in question as opposed to addressing specific, local occurrences. For example, “I confess this *wide spread and deep seated pattern of self pity* in my life,” and “In the name of Jesus, we command that all spiritual strongholds connected to or associated with this *wide spread and deep seated pattern of self pity* be torn down now.”
3. Addressing any family tree/generational patterns.

“Full course of antibiotics” means:

1. Confessing the victim swamp sins in question, renouncing the victim swamp sins in question, asking the Lord for true repentance regarding the victim swamp sins in question, and asking the Lord to free you from the victim swamp sins in question.
2. Going through the prayers to address corresponding spiritual strongholds, demonic spirits, and curses.
3. Looking for others in the family tree with victim swamp sins, and then going through the prayers for generational sins, strongholds, spirits, and curses as appropriate.

See “General Introductory Comments...” for additional comments.

Common problems: Comments especially relevant to problems that hinder releasing victim swamp sins will be included here. See “General Introductory Comments Regarding Ministry Aids” for additional discussion of each of the common problems that can get in the way of releasing defenses/vows/judgments/self pity/other sins/etc.

1. **Core lies getting triggered:** As described above, lies triggered by the discussion of this material can hinder participation in the process.
2. **Guardian lies:** As described above, guardian lies can block full participation.
3. **Vows:** The victim swamp sins can be protected by vows, such as the following self pity vow: “I’ll just sit out here in the rain until I die (I won’t do anything to fix the problem) – then they’ll be sorry.”
4. **Demonic interference:** Demonic spirits associated with the bitterness/self pity/etc. being addressed will try to block the person and/or an internal parts from participating in the prayer. As discussed in “Dealing with Demonic Interference/Opposition during the session...,” it is helpful to “focus the target” when dealing with demonic interference. When I am dealing with possible demonic interference hindering release of victim swamp sins, I will address my commands to “spirits of bitterness, self pity, entitlement, embellishment, and any other demonic spirits associated with the victim swamp.”
5. **Avoidance of the whole truth:** The person receiving ministry needs to truly “see” how badly she has been hurt before she can fully release victim swamp sins. It will hinder release of victim swamp sins if the person is still avoiding the whole truth about how badly she has been hurt.
6. **Internal parts that do not participate:** For complete resolution of the self pity, bitterness, etc. associated with a given memory or issue, all internal parts carrying the self pity, bitterness, etc. associated with the target memory or issue must be present, stay connected, and participate in the prayer.

It is ideal to identify and resolve these problems before going through the prayers and commands to address the victim swamp sins. After discussing the possibility that victim swamp sins may be hindering their healing, ask the person if they sense any anger, uncertainty, or lack of internal unity about going through prayers and commands to deal with bitterness, self pity, etc. This usually picks up guardian lies and lies being triggered by the discussion of victim swamp sins, and often picks up internal parts that aren't ready to participate. See "General Introductory Comments Regarding Ministry Aids" for additional comments.

If it doesn't work: Our experience is that we still sometimes miss something, especially quiet vows and deeper traumatic memories that are carefully protected. It is easy to tell when you miss something because the bitterness, self pity, etc. will still be there when the person is done with the prayer. If this happens, ask the Lord "What do you want _____ (name of the person receiving ministry) to know about this bitterness/self pity/entitlement/embellishment?" and then watch especially for the common problems discussed above. Return to the sample prayers and commands when the blocking problems have been addressed. The Lord will always free a person from the victim swamp when the relevant traumatic memories are fully connected and all interference has been resolved.

Reduce or expand the reactive sin target words to facilitate connection: One of the most important goals for our sample prayers is to help the person receiving ministry to connect experientially/emotionally with the core concepts, and to stay connected throughout the prayer - to stay emotionally connected to the meaning of the prayer as they go through it. Use fewer target words if a longer list is hindering emotional connection by becoming distracting or confusing (for example, just "self pity"). Include additional target words if doing so seems to help make and maintain experiential/emotional connection (for example, "self pity, feeling sorry for myself, entitlement, and embellishment"). The same principle applies to whether or not to include the reactive sin target words at each point in the prayer. See "General Introductory Comments..." for additional comments.

Risk of blaming the person receiving ministry: One of our colleagues raised the concern that the material in this essay could result in blaming the person receiving ministry for lack of progress in the healing work. This is a valid concern, and we can't over emphasize the importance of examining your own heart for any judgment and/or blame towards the person receiving ministry (see again comments above regarding the need for the therapist/facilitator to be non-judgmental). It is also important to realize that *sometimes* bitterness, self pity, etc *are* blocking the emotional healing process, and that the person receiving ministry needs to confess and release these in order to move forward. One reason we decided to put this material on the table, even with the risk that it could be misunderstood and/or mis-used, is my own experience with being stuck in the victim swamp. There was a certain group of lies and emotions that had been especially resistant to change, even though I had been working on them persistently for years. At several points in this long and difficult work, I experienced important breakthroughs after confessing and releasing bitterness towards the Lord and/or self pity. In retrospect, both Charlotte and I perceive that these victim swamp sins had been significantly hindering the healing process.

**Bitterness, Self Pity, Entitlement, and Embellishment:
Sample prayers and commands**

After discussing the possibility that victim swamp sins may be hindering their healing, ask the person if they are sure they are ready to release bitterness, self pity, etc. If there is any anger, sense of uncertainty, or lack of internal unity regarding letting go of these victim swamp sins, look especially for guardian lies, core lies being triggered by the victim swamp discussion, and internal dissociated parts that are not ready to release the victim swamp sins.

“Dear Lord Jesus, I confess that I am stuck in the victim swamp. I confess that I use bitterness, self pity, entitlement, and embellishment to protect myself, to comfort myself, and to get things I want. But I am tired of letting these destructive and sinful patterns of thought and behavior block my healing, hinder my relationship with you, and ____ (*can include other ways these affect your life*).

“I confess this _____ (*bitterness, self pity, entitlement, embellishment*) as sin. I ask your forgiveness for these sins. I renounce these sins. I acknowledge that I cannot change my own heart and mind regarding this _____ (*bitterness, self pity, entitlement, embellishment*). I ask You to give me true repentance – I ask you to give me Your heart, Your mind, and Your truth regarding this _____ (*bitterness, self pity, entitlement, embellishment*). Lord, I cannot free myself, but I am willing to be freed. I cooperate with Your desire to free me by asking you to free me and by choosing to confess, renounce, and release this _____ (*bitterness, self pity, entitlement, embellishment*).”

“Lord Jesus, I ask now that you would wash me with your blood, cleansing me and freeing me from all bitterness, self pity, entitlement, and embellishment.

I now choose to accept the life you have given me. I choose to stand straight in the pain from these traumatic memories, so that you can heal me.”

Go back to the memories being addressed and try to stir up the bitterness, self pity, entitlement, and embellishment. Often they will already be gone.

If they are still present, stir them up and then look for Jesus’ presence, listen for His voice, try to sense His presence. Watch, follow, listen to whatever he does/says.

After a few moments, try to find the judgments, condemnation, and self-righteousness.

If the bitterness/self pity/entitlement/embellishment are not gone, ask the Lord “what do you want _____ (*name*) to know about this bitterness/self pity/entitlement/embellishment?” and then watch especially for the common problems discussed above. Return to the sample prayer when the blocking problems have been addressed. The Lord will always free a person from the victim swamp when the relevant traumatic memories are fully connected and all interference has been resolved.

If you feel lead to do so, you can tear down spiritual strongholds (2 Cor. 10), deal with demonic spirits, and break curses:

“In the name of Jesus, we command that all spiritual strongholds connected to or associated with my bitterness, self pity, entitlement, and embellishment be torn down now.”

“In the name of Jesus, we now command all demonic spirits connected to or associated with my bitterness, self pity, entitlement, and embellishment to go immediately and directly to the feet of the true Lord Jesus Christ. You will go bound. You will not touch or harm anything or anyone on the way. You will never return and you will never send anything in your place. He will deal with you as He sees fit.”

“In the name of Jesus, we command that all curses in any way connected to or associated with my bitterness, self pity, entitlement, and embellishment be broken and rendered powerless, null, and void.”