

GOD, ME, AND OCD

~ ASHLEY STAMPER ~

As I type, small flakes of translucent skin fall onto the keyboard. Lately, my hands have resembled a lizard when it sheds, a consequence of excessive hand-washing due to obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). But as dry and cracked as my skin gets, the physical effects are insignificant compared to the emotional, social, and spiritual implications of the illness. The National Institute of Mental Health explains that OCD “is a common, chronic, and long-lasting disorder in which a person has uncontrollable, reoccurring thoughts (obsessions) and/or behaviors (compulsions).” In the United States alone, there are millions of people who suffer from the illness, and many of them live without proper treatment. Like many, my obsessions started early, as did the compulsive hand-washing, resulting in painful, bleeding hands, which family members loved to comment on. From an obsessive fear of germs, fire (including the color orange), and cancer to compulsive counting and facial tics, my young mind was tormented. Back then, treatment was not widely available, and my parents did not seek help. The situation worsened as a teen. My high school experience was marked by overachiever status and anorexia. Both were manifestations of OCD. I got excellent grades and ate nearly the same thing every day for a few years while obsessively worrying about my future and my weight. I ended up at a doctor’s office with my mother. The doctor had no clue how to help me, and she blatantly judged me. So that was the end of treatment. Thankfully, while in college, God miraculously healed me of the eating disorder, which is a story for another day. Even though my anorexia was healed, OCD is a tricky beast. Once an obsession or compulsion is conquered, something new will pop up. My mind always reverts to

germs (contamination OCD). My struggle became more apparent as I moved abroad to do mission work in a corrupt and impoverished country, a place where people defecated in the streets and drug users and transvestite prostitutes congregated in my neighborhood. Oh, the stories I could tell! Around this time, my first child was born, bringing additional stress, which OCD feeds on. So here I am a few years later, ministering in a different foreign country with a second child while still battling OCD, and my social anxiety is at an all-time high (especially considering the current pandemic). A while ago, my husband encouraged me to seek counseling, but I was not interested because of the stigma I (and other Christians) had wrongly associated with therapy for mental illness. Eventually, at a low point, I decided to try biblical counseling. Counseling has been quite an experience, and there is much to talk about—from the counselor who labeled me a sinful, legalistic Pharisee to the counselor whose anxiety was nearly as high as mine. My current biblical counselor is a good fit, and I am optimistic. Recently, she encouraged me to focus more on knowing and enjoying God as well as pondering His love for me. For too long, I have found my identity in OCD, and in doing so, I have suffered physical, emotional, social, and spiritual repercussions. In tune with what my counselor said, I heard a sermon on Psalm 8:3-5, which reads “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor.” This reminds me that I am not alone in my struggle, and despite my failures, God cares for me and has crowned me with glory and honor, which gives me hope for tomorrow.

