

Lessons From a Personal Story

Escaping pain is often Satan's ploy, not God's. Escape from suffering leads us away from a cross that we are asked to bear - a cross where we will share the suffering of Christ and come to know him. Following Jesus and sharing his story will inevitably involve the fellowship of his sufferings. If we are to profit from the pain of life we must be willing to see through the pain to the face of Jesus.

You can't get to where I am without being where I have been.

Humanly speaking, the person most responsible for my conversion to Christian faith was a man whose correspondence from prison so impressed me that I poured over his letters wanting to know what made him tick. His words form the basis of some of my thoughts in this book. He was himself converted later in life and felt called to leave his professional life to minister "full time" in the church. In many ways he did not have an easy time of it. He did not have the gifts of speech that were needed for a preaching ministry. In spite of this he worked hard to gain acceptance as a teacher. The results of his ministry were mixed and he often was discouraged but he kept on. His discouragement was compounded by the fact that while misunderstood and marginalized by his non-Christian, culture he was also abandoned by his Christian friends. It seemed that he fought physical illnesses and personal sins most of his life and spent the last years of his ministry in prison for crimes that he did not commit. He suffered so much and in so many ways. It seemed to me that he died as a person who had reason to question the goodness and power of God, but he continued to express a peace and joy that seemed supernatural. I wanted what he had. I wanted to know the Jesus that he knew.

Of course the person of whom I speak is the Apostle Paul. Many of us fail to appreciate how disappointing the circumstances of his life must have been in his day. If we were told that we were called by the Lord God of the universe to bring the gospel to the world as an Apostle of Jesus and then were forced to face the circumstances that Paul faced, we might wonder if the call was really of God. God seemed to be too often absent in the circumstances that Paul faced. Why would God allow Paul to stay in prison when he could have been in the Roman coliseum preaching? Why would Paul not have the support of the churches when he was so alone? Why would he face the numerous hardships that seemed to be unrelated to his witness for Christ - shipwreck, snakebite, logistical conflicts, etc? Paul clearly admits that he was not a gifted speaker. Why was Paul not given the kinds of gifts (public speaking for example) that would have made his ministry so much easier?

Let's go back to the observation that God seemed to be absent from the circumstances. The key word here is "seemed." The challenge for all of us is to have broad enough horizons in our perspective to see God's hand in the picture. When we just see the narrow, short-term context, we run the risk of seeing only meaningless and senseless suffering. When Paul asks in Romans 8, "What can separate us from the love of God?" he is speaking out of deep personal experience of suffering, confusion, and terrible circumstances in life. Paul seemed

to be fully aware of the chaos of a fallen world. He had deep peace, joy, and power to live above his circumstances without denying their reality or their pain. It was almost as though he welcomed the hardships as though they were doors and windows to knowing Christ. The question that I had to ask myself as I read Paul was this: “Can I get to the place where he was in life without going the way he went?” Must I also share the suffering of Christ to know him? I had worked hard to avoid Paul’s way of the cross and hoped that I could “get a bye” and still know Jesus’ peace and joy as he did. I’m afraid I was wrong.

There were three important areas of shared experience that have made knowledge of God more dramatic for me.

1. God will take away our simple answers to enable us to know His suffering over a broken world.

I am sometimes accused of being a little cynical in my teaching. I plead guilty in part. I am cynical about this age but not about the age to come. Over time, God took away many of my easy answers to show me that God’s message of hope was not centered in this world.

I will call her Jill; that was not her real name. She and her husband were on their way to a life of missionary service when difficulties in their marriage started a series of events that would lead to the most unexpected conclusion. She came to faith from an abusive environment, which left scars that sabotaged a promising marriage. Months of intense therapy had exposed pain that often brought her to the end of all hope but God. I was encouraged as I met with her and saw signs of renewed hope in her life, creating energy to reengage with her husband and resist the fears that had haunted her. I was confident that healing was near, that she would now begin to experience the freedom and joy that had been for so long absent in her experience. Her perseverance in faith, her hard work in therapy, her hours of prayer were all going to bear fruit. Or so I thought. I was wrong.

While separated from her husband and living alone with her young daughters, she was brutally assaulted by an intruder and in the presence of her children was killed with a kitchen knife. I received word of the murder while out of town and rushed back. As I sat in her apartment and wept with her husband, our tears mixed with the blood-splattered walls of her room. I will never forget that special time that I shared with her husband. It was one of those binding experiences facilitated by pain. I left that experience with a deep commitment to never, ever offer simplistic “Christian platitudes” to those who would hear me teach the truths of God’s Word. I became a cynic of temporal hopes that day. I knew that her hope and mine could never be centered in this life.

I came to know Jesus’ suffering through this tragedy. This Jesus was not the popular Jesus of Christian consumerism, nor the easy-answer Jesus of spiritual Camelot, nor the Jesus who is a chaplain to the American dream. The Jesus that I met was the Jesus who entered a broken world that was more like hell than heaven. This Jesus whose life was full of enigma and injustice itself, offered a hope that had little political use, limited temporal merit, and

virtually no assurance of happiness for those who lived only for this life. I was forced to feel what Jesus felt as He came to a world that was not fair, but was twisted and broken. I walked with him and thus knew him in a way I had not before. My pain was a small but real part of his.

Sharing Jesus' suffering not only took away my simple answers to life's questions, it also shattered my dreams.

2. God will take away our selfish dreams to enable us to know His sorrow over an unresponsive people.

My wife and I sat staring into space through the windshield of our car. The day was gray and misty, our hearts were heavy. We had just spent an hour with a pediatric neurologist who was examining our son. Daniel was our first-born and a beautiful healthy boy. I had dreams of teaching him to play ball, develop a love for learning, and grow to love Jesus. When his development was delayed our doctor had us see a specialist. The initial diagnosis was not certain, but it was serious. Over the next several months and years we gradually learned that Daniel suffered from infantile autism, profound retardation, touret's syndrome, bipolar disease, and a severe seizure disorder. Daniel would grow up never knowing who we were, never speaking a word, never understanding our love for him. He is now in his late 20s, but remains locked in his own world, not much more developed than he was when he sat in that doctor's lap in 1974. Only those who have had a special child with profound disabilities can know the confusion, pain, stress, anger, and despair that we faced.

We found the special care that he often demanded to be overwhelming, especially with two other children in our family. We had wonderful support from others and found God to be faithful in providing for Daniel's needs when we could not. But I did not really know what a blessing Daniel would be to my life until I realized that he would give me a gift that no one else could. That gift would be the privilege of feeling Jesus' pain as so often his church lived in its own world – seeing but not perceiving, hearing but not understanding, looking healthy but not knowing much of life at all. I can vividly recall sitting at my desk in my bedroom with Daniel (who was 2 years old at the time) at my feet. I looked down at him and felt so much love for him but had no way to connect with him so that he would know of my heart. It was one of the most frustrating and painful experiences in my memory but it was also one of the most spiritual moments in my life. I actually felt the feelings of God as he looked upon an autistic church.

For years I expected Jesus to comfort me in my pain. What I did not understand was that it was the pain that would be my comfort, in that it would enable me to experience the heart of God. I am preoccupied with pain in my teaching. I don't think we can really know Jesus without being in touch with the pain of having our dreams die so that his vision of life might prevail. As Paul put it *“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us”* (Romans 8:18).

God took away my simple answers so that I could know his suffering. He took away my selfish dreams that I might know his sorrow.

3. God will take away our sense of moral pride to enable us to know His shame in bearing our sin.

The Apostle Peter makes it quite clear that there is no favor or credit in suffering for doing evil (I Pet.2:20). But that is not to say that there is no value or opportunity in our shame as it allows us to know Jesus. In bearing our sin and the shame of the cross, Jesus goes before us. He is waiting for us to be with us in our time of failure and shame.

After several years of successful ministry I went through a personal spiritual, moral, and relational crisis that left me stunned, publicly shamed, and vulnerable in ways that I never expected. I had morally failed. I had betrayed a sacred trust to my wife, children, congregation, and coworkers. Without going into the complex details - and they are always complex - I was forced to face things about myself that were hard to accept. I had justified arrogant withdrawal in relationships and not recognized or mourned my prideful independence from God and others. I had lied to others and betrayed their trust. I had seen my independent spirit as a strength and not as it so often really was, a liability. I stood before a congregation of people that respected and loved me and made a public confession of my sinful behavior and I resigned from my position as pastor where I had served for 28 years.

The weeks, months, and years that followed were characterized by deep shame and pain. This shame did not go away with the hundreds of loving letters and words that came to me from the congregation. The shame did not lift as the result of months of therapy. The shame began to lift only when I realized that Jesus had shared my shame long before I felt it. He knew exactly how I felt and was there in it with me. Three insights came through my humiliation. Each was significant in drawing me to know Jesus as I had not known him before.

First, I realized that he was not looking down from a throne with disgust at a pathetic sinner. He was looking over from his cross to my cross as one who became sin for me. My shame was his long before it was mine. I had always known that I was called to be crucified with Christ. I just did not expect it to be as one of the thieves beside him. To get into the core of God at his greatest, I had to first get into the core of myself at my least.

Second, I did not know that the isolation, that makes shame so shameful, would be broken by a Jesus who hung there with me. I now realize why it was so significant that those close to Jesus abandoned him at the cross. For the cross to be the hellish experience that would redeem us from all sin, it had to involve isolation, not just isolation from God but isolation from all human support. As I contemplated the cross, I realized that no human had ever been more sensitive to community than had Jesus, yet he now was left alone. Even the 12 were gone, along with Mary, Martha, and perhaps even his mother. He was outside the gate in every sense. Those who had trusted him were let down by him. They understood him

to promise the Kingdom and he had failed to deliver it. To their way of thinking, he was a liar and a fraud. He could no longer be trusted. His authority was destroyed in their eyes. He was alone.

When I stood before my congregation and confessed to them my failures, I also felt so alone. The pain of public humiliation is in the sense of isolation that it involves. One person told me after my public confession that they wanted to stand there with me and say, “In the past, you confessed the word of grace for us so that we would say ‘Amen’. Now you face personal humiliation for sin and we have an opportunity to see ourselves in you again to say, ‘Amen’ for we too are sinners in need of public humiliation and repentance.” If this person and others had stood there with me, it would have worked a powerful healing for all of us, but then again, I would have been kept one step further away from empathy with our Lord and the cross. I wanted the comfort that would come from the presence of others. I needed the isolation that would enable me to know Jesus, as I had not before.

Third, for years, I saw the suffering of Jesus as an unjust and heroic act on his part. He was sinless in his life. He did not deserve this treatment. If there ever was a person who had a cause to protest personal injustice, it was Jesus. But I now see that I had missed the whole point of the cross. I now see the crucifixion of Jesus as fully deserved. He became my shame and guilt. The Father’s wrath against sin was now against the sinner (or sin bearer) Jesus. He had become sin for me. Jesus was not gesturing empathetically toward us who were deserving of rejection, he was experiencing the rejection, isolation, and pain of hell as one who became guilty with and for us. Jesus endured the full anger of unholy men in his life and the full anger of a holy God in his death. His sufferings and ours travel similar paths by divine design that we might know him and know that he knows us.

The hope he offers is with full respect for the chaos of life’s pain. The gospel is a simple message but its simplicity is on the far side of life’s complexity and suffering. That is, it makes a full accounting of the chaos of suffering in life. It does not pretend that suffering does not exist. There is unfortunately a “Christian” simplicity that is on the near side of life’s complexity. It is a simplistic response that seems to ignore the impact of the enigma of suffering. It offers simplistic answers that have little value for those who have had their lives broken on the rocky shores of a fallen world. Knowing Jesus will put us on the far side of suffering because we can only know him as we understand and share his cross. Christ represents a powerful hope, but outside of Camelot.

As we share the shame of our sin, in some small part, we can more fully know the extent of our own fallenness and need for grace. My shame came largely as a result of public exposure, but it had been there for years. To a large degree, the shame in my life had been dormant, managed, hidden, disguised, and certainly unfelt. I did not suddenly become a sinner. I had been a sinner for all of my life. But like so many others around me, I had not seen my condition as that bad. It took a personal train-wreck for me to see the true shameful condition of my heart. The cross is the place where each of us come to know Jesus and

ourselves. You see, experiencing suffering and shame are avoided at our peril. We can only know some things as we move toward our pain and through it. Our dignity as children in the image of God is clarified as we see the serious consequences and feel the pain of falling short of that image. Our experience of the cross is vital to our appreciation of our calling as a divine, image-bearing human. When we sense our shame, see and appreciate God's sacrificial love, and begin to walk in step with the Son of Man, we begin to experience life. Where much is forgiven there will be deep and rich worship, loyal love, abiding hope and true human dignity.

God exposed my simple answers so that I could know his suffering. He exposed my selfish dreams that I might know his sorrow and he exposed my moral pride that I might know his shame.

Do you want to know Jesus? You will not know Him through learning the Bible, or through experiencing the joy of his gracious salvation, or through the experience of His power in your life, like you will know Him as you are allowed to fellowship in his sufferings. You might find that this is not a path you want to follow unless and until you see the glory of its treasure. Here is the lesson for us in this chapter. Move toward, not away from your pain, for in it you may find Jesus and your true self. We should expect good things to happen in our relationship with God as we are forced to face pain and suffering, no matter what its cause or reason. We must be able and willing to move toward our pain with expectation that God's Spirit will draw us closer to Jesus at the point of our suffering.

But it is not only our personal pain that provides opportunity for a deeper knowledge of Jesus. As we are sensitive to the hand of God in the dynamic pain of society's stories, we can know him and find peace and joy in places where the world is trapped in bitterness, hostility, and rage.