

## I. Introduction

A. The other day I got a text from a friend in which he apologized for not responding sooner, “But,” he wrote, “I’ve been on the road almost nonstop and I do not take texts when I’m driving.” He went on to explain that he’d been in two serious car accidents and spent lots of time in the hospital because he’d been trying to answer emails while driving. He ended by saying, “Can you believe I had to have two accidents before I learned?”

B. Sure. I have no problem believing that he had to have two accidents. I’m surprised that it only took two. And this has nothing to do with him and everything to do with me and everyone else. It sure seems like we do the wrong thing a few dozen times before we learn, and that some people never do.

C. Shortly after I moved out of shock and denial, I started asking questions about my stroke. I wanted to figure out why it had happened so that it wouldn’t happen again. That was true at two levels. I wanted to understand things medically and I also wanted to understand them spiritually. To paraphrase Paul in Galatians 3, I wanted to be sure that I didn’t waste the pain.

D. In Galatians 3, Paul chides the Christ-followers in Galatia for doing something similar. The letter was written by Paul to refute the ideas raised by the Judaizers – a group of Jews who followed Paul around, arguing that in order for a Gentile to become a Christian they first had to become a Jew and embrace the Jewish lifestyle and all the customs – e.g., they had to keep the Mosaic Law. Paul is having none of it. In Galatians 3:4 Paul asks: Have you experienced so much in vain?

E. Let me make a similar plea here: Don’t waste your pain. Rick Warren says this with a bit more flair. After arguing that most people waste their suffering. He says:

1. They do not profit from their problems... harvest their hurts... advance from their adversity... learn from their losses... improve from their injuries or gain from their pain.

F. In contrast to this approach we have what Paul said about the Corinthians. In 2 Cor. 11:7 – and I’m reading this from *The Message* – he writes:

1. And now, isn’t it wonderful all the ways in which this distress has goaded you closer to God? You’re more alive, more concerned, more sensitive, more reverent, more human, more passionate, more responsible. Looked at from any angle, you’ve come out of this with purity of heart. And that is what I was hoping for in the first place when I wrote the letter.

G. Today I want to help you think about using whatever pain you’re going through – emotional, physical, financial, relational, spiritual, whatever – to move forward and serve.

H. This might strike you as odd. You are thinking, “I’m just trying to survive.” Right. I get that, but everyone wins when we serve others, starting with us. Serving is likely part of our pathway out of the pain and towards more health and joy. There are at least four ways our trials can help us.

II. Four Ways Pain and Trials can help us grow.

A. First: Pain can draw us closer to God.

1. I wrote about this a bit in the first chapter of Book One, noting that if the trial is big enough it forces most of us into one of four camps:

a) Some find God. Trials often bring us to the end of ourselves. They force us to realize that self-sufficiency is a temporary illusion and embark on a serious search for the divine. Looking for God may not be our first response. Indeed, some who claim that God does not exist will rage against Him for years before realizing that they have to believe in Him in order to blame Him. Still others will only reach out to God after deciding they have nowhere else to turn. This is common. In fact, while it’s a bit of a stretch to say that no one finds God unless suffering comes into their lives, it’s not much of one. So, some enter the rapids as atheists and come out the other end with faith.

b) Some lose their faith. Trials drive some to God and others away – these people enter the rapids believing but lose their faith after being flipped out of the raft, often because they believed that if they believed they wouldn’t get flipped out of the raft – that life would be easy. It is because of the number of people who end up in this camp that I decided before my stroke that we needed a series on suffering. I was tired of visiting people in the hospital and rather than finding them at peace with God in the midst of the crisis I find them confused that this could ever happen to them. They thought that by attending church and trying to follow God that nothing bad would happen to them. That is not a promise we get in the Bible. It’s closer to an affirmation of *karma* than it is of biblical Christianity.<sup>1</sup>

c) A third group stalls. They move into a no-man’s land. They seem to say, “I believe in a God who will not allow me to suffer; I am suffering; I still believe in a God who will not allow me to suffer.” It’s an unsustainable position, but you have to be reflective to realize that. Some camp here for quite some time.

d) Finally, some people grow. Some leverage the trial to move closer to God. Their faith and joy grow deeper not in spite of the pain but because of it.

2. As I've shared in a variety of ways, my times with God were sweeter in the crisis than at an ordinary time. How do we do this? How can we draw closer to God in our pain? Lean in. Read the Bible. Pray. Talk to God about what's going on. Cry out. Do the things we've talked about in this series: In shock, express your confusion; in sorrow, declare how sad you are; if you're struggling, express your anger.<sup>2</sup> Then surrender: yield to God and grow, grow, grow.

3. In 2 Corinthians 7:9 Paul says that he's glad they went through the trial he's been writing about, "not because it hurt you but because the pain turned you to God."

4. The first benefit of a trial is that it can help us move closer to God.

B. The second way trials can help us grow is that they can move us closer to others. If you allow it, pain will deepen your love.

1. I felt very close to my family, especially Sheri, who was wonderful, and I will not say much more lest I embarrass her. But I realized that people in my spot can generally expect three things to happen: first, they are going to lose their job; then they are going to lose their house; and then, if they are married they are going to lose their marriage.

2. My lowest moment came when I started thinking, "there is no way she can keep this up; no way she will stay with me." I never had any reason to think that she would leave, and many reasons to be assured that she would not. I just wondered how long she could hold up. As my head cleared (as the dimmer switch got turned up), I realized how vulnerable and dependent I was.

3. There were a couple of comic moments – at least in retrospect. One happened with my food tray. You need to understand the big thing about my time in ICU was that I was so thirsty. I had an IV going right into my jugular vein with a saline solution that was designed to keep my brain from swelling. It made me very, very thirsty. In fact, around this time a nurse came in to check on me in the middle of the night and found me awake and slouched over. I had tried to be kind, patient and compliant with the medical staff. I knew they were working hard and that some of the other patients on the floor were very difficult. People with brain injuries are not always compliant. Well, in the middle of the night this young nurse walks in, is surprised that I am awake, and she says, "Mr. Woodruff, how are you doing?"

a) And I said, “Well, how do you think I’m doing? I’m dying for a drink of water but no one will give me one. I’m not asking for much. I’m not asking for drugs. I’m asking for water – a glass of water. So, I want you to go wake one of those thousand-dollar-an-hour neurologists and say, “The poor man is making a reasonable request. All he wants is water. Let the man have a drink.” And so she scurries out and in a couple minutes comes back in and I say, “Did you get me some water?” Now, as an aside, I can’t drink water at this point. Parts of my throat are paralyzed so I choke on it. I’d water-boarded myself once with the one thimble full they’d given me. So, I can’t drink water, but I’m not thinking very clearly.

b) And so, I’m all excited, “Do I get a drink of water?” And she says, as she is giving me a shot of some kind of sedative, “Everything is going to be just fine.” We have ways of dealing with people like you.

4. Well, around the same time they brought in a food tray. I could eat long before I could drink, so I’d get these semi-solid liquids. There was something called Hydrolite – which was water thickened with corn starch that you ate like a shake. It’s horrible – when I had it later on, after I wasn’t so dehydrated it was horrible – but at the time I couldn’t get enough of them. Well, one afternoon they set a tray of food in front of me and I said to Sheri, you can have anything you’d like on this tray, except my Hydrolite. And, as a joke, she said, “Well, I can actually have anything I want.” And she moved the tray back a few inches, and I realized, how utterly dependent on others I was. It was a joke. Trust me, she did not want to my Hydrolite. But it made me realize, I am completely dependent on others. If they don’t help me there is nothing I can do about it. And that made me very thankful for the great care I was getting – but for a few seconds, very scared about what would happen to me if they stopped. A crisis can help you realize how dependent you are on others – and draw you closer to them. Self-sufficiency is a temporary illusion.

5. A crisis can also alert you to the suffering of others. About a month later, after I finally got out, I was told to check in with my regular doctor. So, Sheri drove me to his office, and helped me walk in. I was doing my Boris Karloff impersonation at the time: walking very slowly, wide stance, sliding against walls. As soon as we got into the lobby of the office I sat in the first chair and Sheri went up to register me. After a few minutes, the receptionist came out and handed Sheri a clip board and said, “You’ll need to update his medical history.” And I realized, she didn’t think I could do it. And that made me furious. This wasn’t her fault. But I’d not liked the way I’d been left out of conversations when I was in a wheel chair. They often took place 2 feet over my head. And this was another unintentional slight.

a) I'm a fairly tall, overly educated, white male. As Sheri pointed out to me, I have little experience being ignored and I do not put up with it when it happens. By God's grace I didn't snap at the woman. Instead, after a flash of anger I was overwhelmed with this realization: I'd been looking past people my whole life, looking over the heads of those who were struggling.

6. Men and women, the amount of pain out there is huge. A crisis can help you understand that in ways you may not.

7. I hope you are sharing your stories with each other in small groups. As I noted at the start of this series, there are four levels of sharing: 1) The shallowest level is the fellowship of sharing. How's your day? How are you doing? What's going on in your life? What did you think about the Bears? It's not bad but it's not deep. 2) Next is the fellowship of studying, where you dig into the Bible together. 3) The next is the fellowship of serving. If you work on a project as team that will help you gel. If you do this on a short term mission trip that will really help you come together. 4) But the deepest level of all is the fellowship of suffering. And the only way you get there is if someone is willing to be vulnerable. Take the risk of being vulnerable and share some of the pain – share what you're feeling.

C. Third – a third upside of a trial is: we can leverage the pain to become more like Jesus. Pain can draw us closer to God; it can draw us closer to others; and – third – it can help us be more like Jesus.

1. Last week I talked about the fruit of the Spirit – 9 qualities that should ripen in our life as we grow. Well, we learn these lovely qualities in unlovely situations. We learn joy in grief; we learn peace in chaos; we learn patience by having to wait. **We do not learn much in comfort, but we** can let trials make us more like Jesus.

2. Not everyone does. Some get better and some get bitter. It's a choice. We are not simply Stimulus-Response machines. You've probably seen this (S – R) before, especially if you had Intro to Psychology. It generally comes with the lecture on Pavlov's dog. They rang the bell just before giving the dog food. And eventually all they had to do was ring the bell and the dog would start to salivate.

3. Well, between the S and the R we think. This is part of what makes us different than animals. We process at a higher level. We can use trials and pain to get better. We tend not to learn much in comfort. We do not always learn when we suffer, but as Proverbs 20:30 notes: Sometime it takes a painful experience to make us change our ways. And we do not learn much in comfort.

4. Because in this life God is more concerned with our character than our comfort – because He wants us to get better, to become more like Jesus – trials come our way. Think about what I am saying here. We want to be more like Jesus who, even though He was without sin, (we are told in Hebrews 5:8) grew through trials. The writer of Hebrews says, “...he learned obedience from what he suffered.”

5. Given this, we can expect that there will be times when we are lonely, misunderstood, criticized, maligned and judged. All of these happened to Jesus. We can expect similar. God didn't spare his own Son. If he is going to grow us, we can expect trials. And we can try to leverage the pain to be more like Christ.

6. I suspect that there are some things we can only learn through pain. Are you paying enough attention to learn from your mistakes? As a general rule, we all get hurt in the same ways. Some people learn from their problems and grow. Others do not. Some who are hurt decide that they will never let another person hurt them again. That's a bad idea. For starters, if we shut ourselves off from hurt, we shut ourselves off from love. If you build a wall and fill the moat and pull up the drawbridge so you cannot be hurt by another, you are in a self-imposed prison.

7. I don't know what's discouraging you this day. It may be a physical problem, it may be a financial problem, it may be a relational problem. There may be issues that have hung over your head like a storm cloud for decades. You are wondering, “How long Oh Lord? When will this end?” You see no end in sight. You do not see any solutions on the horizon. You do not see any value – any purpose – in the pain. You are discouraged and you feel like giving up.

D. Let's stop here and pray. If you would like prayer for the challenges you are facing right now, I invite you to stand up. And I'm talking to those of you at the 01 and HP and Crossroads as well. If you are going through physical or financial or emotional or relational or professional challenges of any type and you are discouraged or headed that way, I want us to pray for you. Please stand. I've asked a special guest to lead us in this time. It's someone who is part of the stroke club, who came to visit me right after I moved home and offered some sage advice about what I could expect as I tried to move forward, and who told me that since his stroke he has spent a lot more time praying.

E. Sean Logan attends the HP campus. I've asked him here to pray for all of us.

### III. Fourth: There is one final purposes for pain in your life

A. We can leverage pain to grow closer to God and we can use it to grow closer to others – to see them in their own pain. We can allow pain to help us grow more in the image of Jesus. Finally: we can use our pain to help others. We can serve out of the very ways we have been hurt.

B. In 2 Corinthians 1:4-6, Paul writes: Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.

C. God comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. God comforts us in our challenges so that we can comfort others. Don't waste your pain. Use it. Who is best equipped to help a struggling veteran than somebody who's been there - another veteran? Who can best help parents of a special needs child than somebody who has been a parent of a special needs child? Who better to help somebody struggling with a chronic illness than somebody who is struggling with a chronic illness? Who best to help someone with an addiction than someone whose struggled with an addiction? Who better to help someone who has been molested or abused than someone who has been molested or abused?

D. Don't waste your pain. Don't hide your hurt. Let God recycle it, and use it. Let God bless other people through you.

E. And by the way, there is real joy there. I've not been able to drive since my stroke because my vision isn't quite right. Things move on me and I can't yet track moving objects. So, since my stroke I've had to be driven lots of places. It's humbling. I try to wait at the end of the driveway when people come to pick me up. One of the guys I talk to a couple times a week, calls that the bus stop and he calls many mornings to see if I'm at the bus stop and to make sure I remembered my Spiderman lunch pail and backpack. The person – other than Sheri or my son, Ben – who has driven me most a man named Paul who had a stroke twenty years ago and was driven around by others for a couple years before he worked his way back to driving. I've had many offers to drive me, but I've called Paul more than anyone else because it's obvious this is a way he is uniquely qualified to serve. He understands what it's like to be dependent and this is a way for him to serve. Don't waste any of the pain in your life. Use it to help others.

IV. Let me make a final point here. Many think that those outside of faith in Christ are impressed with us by our success. Generally the opposite is true.

A. The world is impressed with how we handle adversity not prosperity. We think that our successes give us credibility. God says no, your suffering gives you credibility. We think that fame earns respect. God says, what actually earns respect is faithfulness in tough times. In a sermon entitled, "Getting Through What You Are Going Through," Rick Warren said:

1. I could stand up here right now and I could tell you my banner list of achievements in my lifetime. I got this award, this award, this award, blah, blah, blah! You'd be going, goody for you. Ain't that grand. I'm not you. It would not draw us closer together. It would not make you more like Christ. It wouldn't serve you. And you would not even be impressed. But when I stand up here and I tell you about the hell that I've gone through after my son took his life after struggling with mental illness for twenty-seven years, that touches you. And you're listening. And it's a witness. What I'm saying is your weaknesses will actually gain a hearing more than your strengths. That's the exact opposite of what everything in the world and culture has taught you. You think I have to be successful to be heard as a Christian. I have to be rich to be heard as a Christian. I have to be famous to be heard as a Christian. No. You have to be authentic in pain. And when you're authentic in pain you will have more people listening to you than you can possibly imagine. Because when I started sharing about my pain they came out of the woodwork. And you would not believe how many lives I've been able to just talk with that I would never have had any connection to in any other way, because pain humanizes. Pain sympathizes. Pain causes you to have credibility with people.

B. In Philippians 1:12, the Apostle Paul – who suffered a lot: beaten, imprisoned, whipped, shipwrecked, gone without food and more – Paul writes:

1. I want you to know, dear brothers and sisters, that everything that has happened to me has helped to spread the Good News.”

2. I've been surprised at the doors that have opened up for me because of my stroke. Doors I couldn't open in other ways. God wants you to use your pain to change your life and the life of others. In many ways, the last thing you want to happen to you may be the very thing God uses to impact others. Your deepest life message will come out of your deepest pain.

V. We are going to have pain in our life.

A. I wish this wasn't true. But it is. You can allow pain to derail you – and you can stay stuck at Struggle, or you can Surrender – yield to God's greater plan – and grow through the pain and then use it as a way to serve others. Your pain has a purpose. Let it make you better. Let it make you more like Christ.

VI. Here is an assignment: Write down the four most painful experiences in your life. Then think about how you have processed them, used them or not.



A. Then write down the names of people you know who are going through something like that. And then think through how you might serve them. Then be ready to talk about that in your small groups this week. Don't waste your pain.

B. In Recovery the last step is helping somebody else. You're not recovered until you're helping somebody else. And if you never help somebody else you will never recover from your pain. It's the only way you get out of it.

## VII. Closing Prayer

A. Dear Jesus, use the pain in my life to draw me closer to you, use the pain in my life to make me more like you. And Jesus, use the pain in my life to allow me to serve others. If you've never opened your life to Jesus Christ, why not do so right now? Say Jesus Christ come into my life right now and begin the healing process. I want to follow you. I want to learn to love you and trust you. I invite you into my life. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Many unwittingly hold to the idea of *karma* – that suffering in the present pays for sins in the past, including in past lives.

<sup>2</sup> I heard Rick Warren say that after the death of Matthew their family did a “surrender retreat” together. He writes, “We went over to Rancho Capistrano and had Jamin Gaugin, who's on staff as the spiritual director of our retreat center, and had him lead us in a retreat of surrender. Why? Because we wanted to be drawn closer to God.”