**Stepping Stones to Spiritual Maturity When I’m Suffering**

May 21, 2023

1. We are six weeks into this eight-week message series called Painful Progress: How God Meets, Comforts, and Grows Us Through Pain. Pain in life is unavoidable. Thankfully, God’s Word has a lot of hopeful things to say about pain.
2. Last week, we discovered that God has a good plan for my pain, as we talked about Guidestones that help us grow. Through pain, God guides me, corrects me, refines me, examines me, protects me, and prepares me for my forever home with him.
3. All pain brings change into our lives. Change is hard, but it’s necessary for growth. This means *all pain is a catalyst for growth*. To say that God has a good plan for my pain is saying God has a good plan for my transformation. Healthy things grow, which means healthy things must transform. The only question is, how am I growing—closer to God and more like Jesus or further away from God and more self-centered and selfish? The Bible tells us God doesn’t like to see us in pain. But God has a good plan for your pain to use your pain as a stepping stone to spiritual maturity, which means growing to be more like Jesus.
4. Pain is a catalyst for change, and pain is also a great teacher, if we’ll listen and learn from it. Good disciples are good learners, but mature disciples apply what they learn to their lives (doers of the Word). In 2 Corinthians 4, Paul shares with the Corinthian church some lessons he learned from pain. Here’s what he learned:
5. In 2 Corinthians 4:8-12,15-18 (NLT), Paul says, “We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. **9**We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed. **10**Through suffering, our bodies continue to share in the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be seen in our bodies. **11**Yes, we live under constant danger of death because we serve Jesus, so that the life of Jesus will be evident in our dying bodies. **12**So we live in the face of death, but this has resulted in eternal life for you… **15**All of this is for your benefit. And as God’s grace reaches more and more people, there will be great thanksgiving, and God will receive more and more glory. **16**That is why we never give up. Though our bodies are dying, our spirits are being renewed every day. **17**For our present troubles are small and won’t last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever! **18**So we don’t look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever.”
6. **What Paul learned from suffering**: **1) God works through my suffering** – pain is inevitable, but through pain and suffering God’s life is displayed in me (vv.10-11); **2) God will use my suffering to save others** – witnessing suffering in Paul’s life produced salvation in the lives of others (v.12); **3) God will use my pain to benefit others** – when you tell others your story of how God has been with you and even blessed and healed you through the pain and suffering, God’s Word promises it’ll produce thanksgiving in our lives, in the lives of others, and that we’ll bring God glory (v.15); **4) God will renew me in the midst of pain** – Paul said that even though his body was dying, he was “being renewed every day” (v.16). Pain doesn’t slow down or cease God’s work in our lives. Sometimes pain accelerates it. God is always working for your good; **5) No pain lasts forever** – one day your pain will be finished. Only God’s glory lasts forever. To help us remember this, Paul encourages us to fix our eyes (focus, attention) on the “things unseen,” on Jesus and the glory to come (vv.17-18).
7. Now, knowing these lessons on pain from Paul are good, even necessary. But is it possible to see God produce those things our lives, too? Yes! One pastor said, pain is either a stumbling block or a stepping stone to spiritual maturity.
8. So, today, we’re going to look to Jesus’s example on the most intense and important night of his time here on earth to discover *four stepping stones to spiritual maturity when I’m suffering*. Spiritual maturity isn’t automatic; it’s intentional, purposeful, and requires transformation. Jesus shows us how to use pain as a stepping stone of faith to grow to maturity.
9. The Gospel of Mark records the events that happened the night before Jesus was betrayed, arrested, abandoned by his disciples, beaten, whipped, and crucified. Jesus suffered intensely: emotionally, psychologically, physically, and spiritually. There’s no pain you’re going to walk through that Jesus doesn’t understand, no pain that he can’t help you use as a stepping stone to grow through.
10. By studying what Jesus did on the evening before was he crucified and putting those habits to work in our lives, I believe that, like Paul, we’ll personally experience greater meaning, purpose, and thanksgiving through the pain, that others will come to know Jesus through our story and witness, and that we’ll bring glory to God through our lives. Let’s get started…
11. When I’m suffering, the first stepping stone Jesus shows me is: **gather with others and worship**. As Jesus and his disciples neared Jerusalem, he instructed them about how to get ready for the Passover meal they were going to share that evening.
12. Mark 14:13-17 (NIV) says, “So he sent two of his disciples, telling them, ‘Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him. 14 Say to the owner of the house he enters, “The Teacher asks: Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?” 15He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there.’ 16The disciples left, went into the city and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover. 17When evening came, Jesus arrived with the Twelve.”
13. Now, when we walk through pain, we have a tendency to exclude and seclude ourselves from others. We start to exclude ourselves by saying no to events, to gatherings, to opportunities, and to church. Sometimes taking a break or taking a timeout for rest, vacation, etc., can be good and healthy. Yet, we can also take it too far and begin to seclude ourselves from the company of others and stop gathering with others altogether, including gathering to worship.
14. Because most of us are familiar with this story, I think it’s easy to lose sight of exactly what Jesus was experiencing at this time. Knowing this was his last meal with his disciples and knowing the pain ahead of him, Jesus must have been feeling a lot.
15. It’s easy to think he was perhaps feeling both fear and faith, both helpless and hopeful, and perhaps even walking through waves of anxious thoughts while also trying to stay in the moment with his disciples.
16. Yet, instead of excluding and secluding himself from others, Jesus modeled gathering with others to worship in a season of suffering. Jesus gathered with his friends to worship through sharing the Passover meal. And that’s what Passover is about: worship. It’s remembering who God is—Almighty God, the God who saves—and what God had done for the Israelites by delivering them from insurmountable suffering and impossible difficulties.
17. Jesus didn’t let pain be an excuse not to gather and worship. Instead, he understood how necessary and beneficial worship is especially in seasons of suffering. So, what are the benefits of worship? Here are three big ones. **Worship helps me…**
18. **Stay Encouraged** – real encouragement, not saccharine platitudes, like, “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” Hebrews 11:25 (GW) says, “We should not stop gathering together with other believers, as some of you are doing. Instead, we must continue to encourage each other even more as we see the day of the Lord coming.” Gathering to worship brings us encouragement we need. Every week, as Ben and I put together the worship service, we do so keeping in mind that you need to be encouraged, to laugh, to be lifted up, recharged and renewed (emotionally, spiritually, mentally, and physically on Sabbath), inspired, and given a fresh perspective on who God is and what God is doing. Church is God’s design for doing all of those things and more. But if you’re not here, you can’t receive it. God’s Word tells us that not gathering isn’t good or helpful to us but, in fact, detrimental. All you have to do is show up and authentically be who you are and worship with honesty and sincerity. When we show up, God will do the work of giving us what we need from him. All we have to do is receive his goodness.
19. **Experience Relief** – Psalm 8:2 (NIV) says, “Through the praise of children and infants you have established a stronghold against your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger.” In other words, God gave us worship to be like a strong place for his people and to silence our enemies. It takes faith like a child to produce those results in your life. Some of our chief enemies when we’re in pain is regret, fear, worry, and anxiety. The amazing thing about worship is that the human brain can’t be both fearful, worrisome, anxious, and worshipful at the same time. It’s one or the other. When we fully give ourselves to God thorugh worship, our worship is the way we battle for victory, and we experience the relief and peace God has designed for us as we worship in his presence.
20. **Gain Godly Perspective** – In 2 Corinthians 4, Paul talks about focusing on what’s unseen. That takes faith. Faith is simply learning to see life as God does and then acting like it (or hearing then doing God’s Word). In Jeremiah 32:27 (NIV), God says, “I am the Lord, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me?” God gets bigger in our eyes through worship. When we worship, problems get smaller, burdens get lighter, and pain is put into proper perspective, as we remember how good and powerful God is. God is the solution you’re looking for. Nothing is too hard for him. Worship builds our faith and helps us gain a godly perspective on life, so we can act accordingly and be in position to receive the good things God wants to give us in every season of life.
21. Through gathering and worshiping at Passover, Jesus shows for us an important stepping stone when we’re suffering, so we can receive the benefits of worship.
22. The second stepping stone when I’m suffering: **sing praise to God**.
23. At the end of the Passover meal, Mark 14:26 (NIV) tells us, “When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.” At the end of the meal, Jesus led his disciples in a song. Scholars think it was a psalm, possibly a Hallel psalm or a “psalm of praise” (Psalms 116-118).
24. Singing has a mysterious and amazing power, doesn’t it? Just this week, while my family was eating dinner together at our table, we heard an unexpected and loud thump on the other side of the house. I got up to check it out. When I came back, my wife and kids were singing a praise song. Quietly, Em leaned over and said, “I’m teaching them to sing praise when they’re afraid.” Like most kids, they don’t like thunderstorms. Later, I heard them singing through the storm.
25. A few Sundays ago, I shared Job 35:10b (ICB), which says, “[God] gives us songs in the night.” When we walk through times of pain and suffering, God will give us a song to sing in a dark place to remember his light and receive hope. I can’t help but think that the Father may have given Jesus such a song in his heart here, to inspire him to sing in a dark time.
26. God loves to be praised through song; it’s one of his favorite ways to be praised. All throughout the Bible, God’s people sing songs to him: songs of praise, of joy, of deliverance, or remembrance, of expectation, and of lament.
27. God loves for us to respond to him in all types of way through music and song. Psalm 147:1 (NIV) says, “Praise the Lord. How good it is to sing praises to our God, how pleasant and fitting to praise him!” Singing pleases God!
28. God loves to hear you sing, your voice, your made-up lyrics, your heart lifted up to him through song. He created your voice. You have nothing to be ashamed of. Don't let pride hinder your worship because you don’t think you sound good. How you sound is how God created you. Make a joyful noise and do what God created you to do. He may not have gifted you to be a worship leader, but he did purpose you to be a leader in worship—a leader of yourself and of your family.
29. Ephesians 5:19 (NCV) says, “Speak to each other with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making music in your hearts to the Lord.” Pastor Ben often tells us, and it’s part of our mission statement for worship at GracePoint, that we sing together so that you’re encouraged and so you can encourage others, too. He didn’t just make that up. It comes from God’s Word!
30. In a time of suffering, Jesus's song reminds us that it’s good to praise God in all seasons, and singing brings peace to our anxious hearts. So, whatever you’re walking through, remember to sing praise to God. Your song doesn’t have to be a happy one, but if Jesus sang praise in his pain, how much more do we need to?
31. The third stepping stone when I’m suffering Jesus models for us: **share my thoughts and feelings with someone**.
32. Mark 14:32a-34a, NIV: They went to a place called Gethsemane…He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled.“My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,” he said to them.
33. Having spent over two decades in the ministry and almost a decade and a half as a lead pastor, the most helpless and utterly crushing expressions of grief I hear comes in the wake of suicide, as a loved one says, “I don’t understand why this happened. I had no idea they were in so much pain. They just never said anything about it.”
34. When you’re in pain, keeping what you’re feeling or thinking to yourself intensifies the pain; it deepens and prolongs the suffering. You’re not alone. Your pain may feel unique to you, but it’s not unique. You’re not too far gone, or beyond help. You’re worth it. You’re loved. But you need to share your pain with others, so what you feel now doesn’t intensify and take you to a place where you feel there’s no way back. *Things kept in the dark fester and cause us to spiral; things brought to light in the presence of another lose their power over you*.
35. Jesus, the Son of God who could have done it all on his own, shared his pain with his friends. Listen to the intensity of how Mark describes the moment and recounts Jesus’s own words (Mark 14:33b-34a, GNT): “Distress and anguish came over him, **34**and he said to them, “The sorrow in my heart is so great that it almost crushes me.” The Message Bible puts it this way: “He sank into a pit of suffocating darkness. He told them, “I feel bad enough right now to die.” *Jesus sweat blood. All this \*before\* the scourging, the crown, the nails.*
36. Do you feel like you’re suffocating in darkness? Jesus knows how you feel, and, since he’s been there, he can show you the way forward, and even the way out. But you need to follow his lead today and share what you’re thinking and feeling with someone.
37. Galatians 6:2 (GNT) says, “Help carry one another's burdens, and in this way you will obey the law of Christ.” Church, we’re commanded to help others carry their burdens. When we help someone carry a burden, we “obey the law of Christ.” What is that? Simple: the law of Christ is loving your neighbor as yourself. It’s doing the loving thing for them that you would want done for you.
38. Hebrews 10:24 (GNT) puts it this way: “Let us be concerned for one another, to help one another to show love and to do good.”
39. If you’re in pain, talk to someone about it. Talk to friends, family, to someone in our church, to counselors, experts, and people who have experience with your pain. To be sure, this isn’t just about mental health. If you have a work pain, a marriage pain, a leadership pain, a financial pain, a life transition pain (graduation, empty nester, a caregiver for your parents), whatever kind of pain, there’s someone out there that's been through what you're going through, and they've got valuable wisdom and insight that you can benefit from right now. But you'll have to seek them out. Pray, and ask God to bring those people into your life.
40. Jesus shared his thoughts and feelings with others in a season of suffering, and so should we. It’s how to treat pain as a stepping stone instead of letting it be a stumbling block to us.
41. The fourth stepping stone when I’m suffering that I learn from Jesus is: **spend time alone with God**.
42. When we’re in pain, we need to gather and worship with others, we need to share what we’re feeling with others, and we need to spend alone time with our heavenly Father who loves us deeply. Mark 14:35-36 (NIV) tells us that’s exactly what Jesus did: “Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. 36*‘Abba*, Father,’ he said, ‘everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.’”
43. Would it be too much to say that Jesus saw “the joy set before him” here, in the moments he felt the tremendous burden of our sin and his sacrifice, and it’s here that Jesus resolved to follow his Father's will to endure the cross for our sake?
44. When we’re in a season of suffering, we need to pray often. In truth, through seasons of suffering, God has shown me how important it is to spend time with him. In other words, through suffering, God taught me the importance of prayer.
45. Here, Jesus shows us how to pray when we’re in pain. First, he recognized God’s closeness to him. Jesus called God “Abba,” which means “Daddy.” Jesus shows us that God desires an intimate relationship with you. Just like any good parent would leap to help their children when they call out in pain, we can call on our heavenly Father to help us in our time of need with familiarity, affection, and expectation.
46. 1 Peter 5:7 (Amplified) says, “Cast all your cares [all your anxieties, all your worries, and all your concerns, once and for all] on Him, for He cares about you [with deepest affection, and watches over you very carefully].”
47. Next, Jesus took a moment to remember God’s power. “Everything is possible for you,” Jesus said. By confessing this, Jesus was expressing faith in God’s ability to provide, deliver, and help in his time of need, no matter how big the pain is.
48. Then, Jesus asked for mercy and relief. There’s no shame in asking for help, deliverance, for a miracle. Jesus did, asking God if there was another way, because he didn’t want to walk through with it if he didn’t have to. That’s a very human quality we see in Jesus. Don’t be afraid to ask God for the help you need.
49. Finally, Jesus surrendered to God’s plan for him. Jesus knew what was ahead of him was painful, but he also knew it was God’s will. And God is always working for our good, even in seasons of pain. Jesus walked into that pain knowing the joy set before him was greater, more real, and more lasting than the pain of the cross.
50. After Jesus prayed, Luke 22:43 (NCV) shares God’s amazing response: “Then an angel from heaven appeared to him to strengthen him.” When we pray, God sends help and strengthens us for what’s ahead.
51. In prayer, we find the nearness of God, the power of God, the mercy of God, and the strength to submit to where God is leading us. You can’t find those things running away from God or running yourself ragged with busyness to avoid the pain or problems you’re facing. You can only find that when you stop and spend alone time with God. You can only receive the comfort and help God wants to give you after you choose to face the pain with God. That begins in prayer.

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*2 Corinthians 4:8-18, NLT*

**What Paul Learn from Suffering:**

* **God works through** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (v.10-11)
* **God will use my suffering to** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (v.12)
* **God will use my pain to** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (v.15)
* **God will** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **in the midst of pain** (v.16)
* \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **lasts forever** (vv.17-18)

**Four Stepping Stones to Spiritual Maturity**

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*Mark 14:13-17, NIV – So he sent two of his disciples, telling them, “Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him. Say to the owner of the house he enters, ‘The Teacher asks: Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?’**He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there.” The disciples left, went into the city and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover. When evening came, Jesus arrived with the Twelve.*

Worship helps me…

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*Hebrews 11:25, GW – We should not stop gathering together with other believers, as some of you are doing. Instead, we must continue to encourage each other even more as we see the day of the Lord coming.*

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*Psalm 8:2, NIV – Through the praise of children and infants you have established a stronghold against your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger.*

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*Jeremiah 32:27, NIV – I am the Lord, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me?*

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*Mark 14:26, NIV – When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.*

*Job 35:10b, ICB – [God] gives us songs in the night.*

*Psalm 147:1, NIV – Praise the Lord. How good it is to sing praises to our God, how pleasant and fitting to praise him!*

*Ephesians 5:19, NCV – Speak to each other with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making music in your hearts to the Lord.*

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*1 Peter 5:7, AMP – Cast all your cares [all your anxieties, all your worries, and all your concerns, once and for all] on Him, for He cares about you [with deepest affection, and watches over you very carefully].*

*Luke 22:43, NCV – Then an angel from heaven appeared to him to strengthen him.*