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# PASSAGES

## FOR PEOPLE IN PAIN

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THOUGHTS ON THE PASTORAL WORK OF COMFORT

A person wearing a bright red hooded jacket is sitting on a wooden pier, viewed from behind. They are looking out over a calm body of water towards a distant, misty shoreline with mountains. The sky is overcast and grey. The wooden planks of the pier lead the eye from the bottom of the frame towards the person and the horizon.

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## Forward

Nothing in life is more certain than suffering. And no subject in the Bible is more clearly or profoundly addressed. We could characterize the entire message of the Scriptures as an answer to the agony that our world daily experiences. Christian wisdom has spoken into every form of suffering because the gospel is a message of hope and healing based on the grief, pain, sacrifice, love and victory of God Himself. God became a human being and remains a risen man to this day for the precise purpose of enduring and defeating injustice, violence, grief, sorrow and death. He has done it all for us in the cross and the resurrection of Christ, not so that we might escape the hardness of life in this age, but that we might have a sure and certain hope in the midst of our pain that He is actively and redemptively with us. He has redeemed and will recreate the entire material universe, fashioning it into what it was originally intended to be – a perfect environment for loving and creative relationships where there is no crying or trauma or pain. But until the day of His return, we press on under His grace, against the odds, trusting His covenant love. The following passages do not exhaust the vast stores of comfort in God's word. But they serve as focal points for meditation on how God helps us endure the hardness of life. As a pastor for over thirty years, I have prayed with and ministered to countless numbers of sincere believers who possessed no real theology of suffering. The grief they were enduring surprised them and undermined their confidence in the Lord's good plans for them. I offer these few comments to those of us who minister to people in pain, not as experts or technicians of the soul, but as co-sufferers in a wrecked world seeking the hope that only Christ Jesus can supply.

We find five sorts of passages that help us interpret and survive long-term trauma in this age: 1) passages that validate pain 2) passages that focus on future blessing 3) passages that combine anguish and hope together 4) passages that express God's promising sovereignty in our suffering, and 5) passages that remind us of the Lord's companionship. There are many Bible verses under each of these categories. The following are some of my favorites.

## Passages that validate pain

One of the agonizing aspects of chronic pain among Christians in our era is the false notion that it indicates that the Lord is in some way punishing them by allowing the affliction. We treat suffering as though it ought not to be, as something to be ashamed of, to conceal because it might indicate either weak faith on our part or the need for God to “discipline us.” Many of us are closet Pharisees who intuitively sense that if we are “right with the Lord,” our life will reflect health, wealth and general ease. Jesus did not treat personal pain this way, His or anyone else’s. He and His apprentices treated all suffering as an unavoidable aspect of life in an age where the Lord is not the acknowledged master yet, where Satan has huge influence and sin still reigns. I have found it very helpful to meditate on the usefulness and honor of pain in this age, not because of a masochistic streak that mistakes pain for pleasure or a legalistic bent that assumes suffering in itself produces spiritual blessing, but because of the more biblical approach that pain is unavoidable in this age and useful to the Lord both in our souls and in the lives of those who watch us endure it. The following passages speak to these points.

### 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

*Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself! Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. And He has said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore, I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.*

This passage validates chronic pain as a profitable companion on the journey of redemptive life in this age. Paul sees his physical weakness as an advantage and a blessing. How counterintuitive is that! He says that when he is weak, then he is strong. What he means is not that weakness is itself a form of strength, but that his material weakness drives him to more deeply trust, experience, and represent the Lord in ways that would be impossible were it not for the affliction. This is a helpful thought for a person who is truly concerned with the kingdom and with serving the Lord at all costs, which was Paul's view, of course. In a sense, the pain becomes something God trusts us with rather than something He either can't stop or is using as a punishment. This highlights trauma as a witness to the Lordship and grace of Christ and the validity of the gospel.

Not many church-going Christians in our culture seem to have this "kingdom-first" mentality, though. In fact, they often become angry at God for allowing (let alone designing) trauma in their world. Yet, by guided meditation on this passage, a Christian might be drawn into a new view of the importance of the kingdom over our agendas for successful life, thereby learning to experience physical limitation as spiritual skill, as Paul did. Seeing value in suffering helps us immeasurably.

#### 2 Corinthians 4:7-10

*But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.*

As with the previous verses, these validate seemingly unaccountable suffering in the life of a believer. They also show the limits of what intractable pain can do to us if we view it as Paul did. Paul did not view material or emotional pain as in any

way terminal, or even unusual for that matter. It is interesting that the pain Paul validates here is what we might call “psychic” or emotional pain. Note the terms he uses (NASB): “afflicted but not crushed; perplexed but not despairing; persecuted but not forsaken; struck down but not destroyed.” Several of these words refer to the inner struggles that result from the physical trials of living in a fallen world. Much of what people suffer when they are in pain is from the intuition that something is cosmically wrong with being in pain and not “overcoming” in some impressive way. The whole passage lets us relax in our human condition (earthen vessels) while still trusting the truth of the gospel to shine through our obvious limitations. The desire to be impressive to others in this age is a source of untold grief to all of us. When Christians suffer in any way, they need to know that all they have to do is suffer. They don’t have to impress anybody. Oddly, by accepting this they usually do radiate a form of hope that is impressive. Go figure.

James 1:2-4

*Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*

James specifically instructs us in how to view trauma when it enters our lives. He says plainly that we should consider it joy. The word for ‘test’ refers to stressing something to see if it is genuine, like when miners used to bite a gold piece to see if the gold was soft (and so pure) enough to dent. When it proves genuine, the value goes way up. God (carefully) lets life thrash us to help us understand the genuineness of our faith. Faith is not the absence of thought, but the presence of a certain sort of thinking that starts with God and so shapes our soul and our destiny (Proverbs 1:7). It is the most important aspect of our life. To have it tested, and thus strengthened, is a huge advantage to

us because it produces an internal power of character that can sustain us in all sorts of other hard times.

### **Passages that focus on future blessing**

All of us are well aware that flippant quoting of cheerful passages to people in deep grief or chronic pain is not helpful, but it's often positively harmful to their faith. On the other hand, if there is time and sufficient relational gravitas, it is worthwhile to help people meditate on precisely how tangible and glorious our life in Christ will be in the next age. Clearly, this is what Paul did with his intractable pain. He makes no apologies for meditating on the material blessings of the spirit world and the tangible glories in the age to come.

Romans 8:18-25

*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. For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it.*

Paul firmly grasped the long-term material results of redemption and their implications for our short-term suffering. His logic reminds us of two encouraging things. First, the glory of the coming redeemed creation is so overwhelming that it literally can't be compared to anything in this fallen age. Teresa

of Avila once commented to the effect that one kiss from the Lord will make the suffering of a thousand years seem like one night in a bad hotel. No comparison. Second, we are not alone in our suffering. The whole cosmos writhes in agony because of the disconnect between God, humanity and the material world. My pain is a significant part of a much larger matrix of suffering that God has personally entered in Christ and is in the process of reversing through the gospel. The creation itself will be set free when God's plan comes to fruition in and through His resurrected people. My suffering is a good part of a redemptive story, and I will certainly experience the tangible blessing of the New Heavens and the New Earth.

2 Corinthians 4:16-5:9

*Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal. For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven, inasmuch as we, having put it on, will not be found naked. For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed but to be clothed, so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life. Now He who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave to us the Spirit as a pledge. Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord—for we walk by faith, not by sight—we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him.*



As with Romans 8:18-25, these verses emphasize the comparison (actually the inability to compare effectively) between pain in this age and glory – a tangible, pleasurable category – in the next. Paul adds here the dimension of suffering that positively affects our inner man and produces a weight of glory in the future. This meditation reminds us of some crucial realities. The invisible world gives focus and perspective to our material experiences. As with so much deep Christian thought, this at first simply seems to be nonsense. How can I focus on the invisible? But Paul is not kidding. He has learned to do this. We can decide to let our thoughts rest purposely on things we cannot see, but that we can imagine, by exercising faith in God's Word. Our imagination is a powerful tool that God has given us not for evil purposes (though we use it for that all the time) but for faithful meditation. Faith is being sure of something you haven't seen yet, based solely on God's character and the fact that He has promised (Hebrews 11:6). By deliberately training our minds to meditate regularly on the weight of glory in the spirit realm, we can cooperate with the Spirit in producing hope in the material realm.

### **Passages that express anguish and hope together**

People generally believe that emotional anguish (often stemming from or coupled with material pain) cannot coexist with vibrant hope, that the anguish extinguishes the hope. This is because "hope" in English is such a flaccid concept. But in the Bible, hope is rooted in the absolutely certain promises of God Himself and so is a radiant and stabilizing reality. The words translated "hope" in our Bibles refer to a supremely confident expectation of future blessing – tangible, future happiness at the deepest levels. Anguish in this age is at times intolerable. Yet when it is combined (not diluted) under pressure with the

biblical idea of hope in the Lord, it produces a golden and rewarding internal and external glory.

Of course, this recipe for character has time as one of its prime ingredients. Which is why waiting and hoping are so often coupled and are sometimes simply synonymous. The Psalms are filled with this rich blend of anguish, confidence and time. We need to remember that in this age many things can be done quickly, and the time it takes to accomplish some goals may be reduced without harm. But this is not now, and never will be, the case in fruit growing. Time remains a crucial ingredient in all organic growth. Life in the Spirit, the growth of Christ's mind and character within us and among us is an organic reality, not a mechanical one. Pastoral work is farming for fruit not trimming for beauty (topiary) or designing for sale (retailing). Which is why patience is such a foundational pastoral skill (James 5:7-8).

2 Corinthians 6:10

*...as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things.*

Sorrowing yet always rejoicing. Because the gospel is born in suffering (the cross) and brings tangible hope (the resurrection), one of the paradoxes of the Christian life is the simultaneous experience of sorrow and joy. Note that Paul does not say, "Sometimes you will be sorrowful and sometimes you will rejoice." He says that the sorrow and the joy will cohabit in our hearts in this age. He is putting in his own words what Jesus taught in John 16:33, that in this world we have tribulation. But the Lord went on to say, "Take courage, I have overcome the world." So, there is a combination of pain and hope in our souls and when we feel the sorrow, we are not being faithless. When we feel the pain, we should deliberately meditate on the hope, while not expecting the pain to go away. This is what the Lord did (Hebrews 12:1-4). Experiencing grief and pain need not eliminate the deeper joy that comes with leaning on the Lord.

## **Passages that emphasize God's promising sovereignty over suffering**

By “promising sovereignty,” I am referring to the Romans 8:28 wisdom that God never allows anything in the life of a believer that does not sovereignly promise a tangible blessing in this age and the age to come (Luke 18:30). I realize that many Christians have a happy inconsistency where they quote Romans 8:28 (usually when somebody else is going through deep water) and then forget it when others perpetrate evil on them. For my money, either God is completely providential over the details of life including fallen human choices, or He's not sovereign over anything important at all. If He is meticulously providential, then this truth can bring great comfort and perspective to a person who trusts the Lord's wisdom, plan and purposes—the sort of person Paul refers to in Romans 8:28. How else are we to understand Jesus' teaching about fallen sparrows and hairs on our heads? (Matthew 10:29-31) These are seemingly unimportant issues, yet that is precisely why the Lord uses them—to explain that our Father is active, especially in the details. Providence is the main way God guides us—the main way. He moved Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem not by a vision, but by a Roman census. Providence. If it's good enough for Messiah's birth, it's good enough for us. Whatever is out of our control is in His, and even what is in our control is in His as well. This is classic Christian wisdom that has been lost through the cracks of our modern, self-confident era. But when chronic pain and trauma is present in our lives, this ancient inspired insight offers a peace that doesn't come from our understanding, but surpasses it (Philippians 4:7).

Genesis 50:20 (see also 45:4-8)

*As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.*

This is a classic verse that reveals Joseph's reliance on the Lord's providence over the 20 years that he endured mistreatment at the hands of various people and government agencies. Practically, it is encouraging because Joseph wasn't saying this based on reading it in a theology book and applying it to somebody else's life. He experienced all the injustice that he refers to as what others "meant for evil." Joseph had the choice to view his affliction from one of two perspectives, and the Bible leaves no doubt which perspective is the right one. Joseph viewed his suffering as part of God's providential plan for the "present result" of blessing the covenant family. True, he mentions this after he has seen the outcome. But it seems clear this implicit trust in the Lord's providence was what kept him going against the odds all those years.

Luke 22:31-34

*"Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers." But he said to Him, "Lord, with You I am ready to go both to prison and to death!" And He said, "I say to you, Peter, the rooster will not crow today until you have denied three times that you know Me."*

This passage doesn't initially present itself as a verse on suffering or affliction. But I think it reveals an important aspect of pain in our age, especially the sort of internal pain that occurs when our suffering results from our own failures. Jesus reveals his views regarding the Father's ultimate sovereignty and the purposes of suffering and affliction. Satan must ask permission

to sift Peter. Yet the Father grants it! The sifting is a battle within Peter where his own failure to uphold his highest aspirations of loyalty to Christ creates what is in essence a crisis of faith in him. It is Peter's faith that the Lord prays will not fail, so that must be what Satan is trying to stress to the breaking point, to "sift out of him."<sup>1</sup> The Father allows the sifting so that Peter will experience his own failure and God's personal grace, which in turn deepens Peter's faith in the Lord while simultaneously piercing his swollen self-confidence. Furthermore, the Lord intends to use Peter to strengthen others who will endure the same sort of testing (2 Cor. 1:4). How will Peter strengthen his brothers when they face times of suffering and personal failure? By coming to their side as a co-sufferer in need of grace, and showing that the Lord loves us through our dark moments. This seems to be what Paul refers to as "bearing one another's burdens" in Galatians 6:1-5.

### **Passages that remind us of the Lord's companionship in suffering**

Most of us feel terribly alone when we suffer. Yet the Scripture consistently reminds us this is not the case. In Psalm 23 David rejoices in the personal attention the Shepherd gives him. He sees himself almost as an only child. What many people miss is the part where the Lord leads David into the dark valley—what experienced saints refer to as 'the dark night of the soul.' That's right. The Shepherd guides to green pastures and beside still waters and restores our soul. But then it says that he leads us in the right path, which is not the path of churchiness, but the right path for us to the destination He has in mind. And even though David will walk through the dark valley, he will not fear the evil there – because The Shepherd is with him. The point is that the Lord leads us into the dark valleys himself and goes through them with us. Tim Keller once said what we need most

in suffering is to know God is for us in it and with us through it. Elizabeth Elliot said Christ suffered not so that we wouldn't suffer, but so that when we suffer we would be more like Him. We need regular reminders of this. That is why He commanded us to take communion often. Bearing down on the truth of the Lord's sacrificial companion love toward one of His suffering servants brings deep comfort.

Acts 9:5

*And he said, "Who are You, Lord?"*

*And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting..."*

Hebrews 4:15

*For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.*

These two passages taken together tell us that the Lord feels our pain metaphorically, but also in a more literal way than we might think. The mystical union of Christ with his church is more than theological esoterica. It is strong comfort that when I suffer, the Lord himself shares it with me. When Saul struck the church, Jesus felt it (Acts 9:4-5). And when we come to the throne of grace, we are talking to a human being who knows more about pain of all kinds than we ever will. The Lord understands our pain from the inside out because He has experienced it firsthand. Christ's memory is as sharp and infinite today as it was ten thousand years ago and as it will be ten million years in the future. He can and does tap that experience. He is with us in the pain all the time.

2 Corinthians 5:21

*He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*

*Galatians 3:13*

*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, “CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE”...*

The Lord became sin for us. He has absorbed the curse of the Law for us on the cross. At first these might seem out of place as “suffering” passages, but they help with a question that most sufferers ask, “Is the Lord punishing me for some secret (or not so secret) sin in my life?” The answer is NO. All of His anger against sin in the believer’s life was absorbed at the cross. That means no matter what, the reason for the suffering is not grounded in the guilt of the believer. That leaves only three possible reasons for pain, and they are all blessings: preparation for growth in Christlikeness (exercise and discipline as in Hebrews 12), Fruitfulness (pruned for more fruit, as in John 15), and future glory (2 Corinthians 4:16-5:9). But I find that our natural tendency is not to believe this. The gospel is clearly good news that God is not wrathful against His children in Christ. In fact the Lord suffered so that when we suffer, we could be free from guilt and fear. When we extract the guilt from our pain, the resulting trauma is much more bearable.

*Colossians 1:24*

*Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions.*

Paul says, “I rejoice in my sufferings ... filling up that which is lacking in the sufferings of Christ.” Paul was a world-class chronic sufferer. Yet as we saw in the other passages, there is not a hint of self-pity in him. The reason seems to be that he saw his suffering as a sharing with Christ’s own sufferings. Paul viewed all his personal suffering in the same category – the category of martyrdom, witness to Christ’s loving and sacrificial

lordship. John Piper points out that this passage only makes sense if we realize the Lord shares in and uses our sufferings to show the world who He is, to demonstrate His glory and sacrifice on humanity's behalf.<sup>2</sup> That which is "lacking in the sufferings of Christ" is not the efficacy of the atonement, but the communication of the heart of God toward humanity in the midst of its suffering. In other words, our faithful suffering, when viewed by others, becomes a window into the compassion and love of Christ. We communicate Christ by being the body of Christ suffering in this world. This validates our suffering and enables us to survive the loss of our life in this age. Again though, the key is the mindset that rests on a radical appreciation for the kingdom of Christ here and now. Paul's logic in validating suffering is based entirely on his correct presupposition that he has died and his real life is hidden in Christ (Col 3:3), and that what gives him joy therefore is to know that somehow Christ is being glorified in and through his pain. Without this converted mindset, Paul's rejoicing amid pain appears as complete nonsense. The immaterial perspective, the metaphysical mindset of converted spiritual thinking, is crucial to all the comfort we may glean from the passages we see here. If the essence of pastoral work is helping people to think like Jesus (and I am convinced it is) then what we offer in the way of comfort amid trials will have its deepest work in the truly converted heart.



## Pastoral thoughts

There are at least two aspects of pastoral work in a broken world that give me some perspective even when seeing through the smudged glass of this life (1 Corinthians 13:12).

1. *Trying to avoid all stress and pain is impossible, but leaning into it when necessary is liberating.* Because trauma is normal in this age, and is redeemed in the kingdom of Christ, we don't need to feel that some strange thing is happening to us when we (or our flocks) endure it. There is an old Yiddish proverb that says, "The truth of God sits on the heart until pain opens a crack, and it falls in." A lot of our pastoral counsel and no small amount of our own comfort would be greatly enhanced by remembering this. "Existence in this fallen world will not be pain-free and trouble-free. There will be groaning because of our finitude and fallenness, and many afflictions because of our calling (Romans 8:23; Psalms 34:19). Frustration is normal, disappointment is normal, sickness is normal. Conflict, persecution, danger, stress – they are all normal. The mindset that moves away from these will move away from reality and away from Christ. Golgotha was not a suburb of Jerusalem." <sup>3</sup>

2. *Being a victim of pain is often outside of our control, but being a perpetrator of it is usually not.* It is important for pastors to commit to absorbing more pain than they inflict. This is the Jesus way. It doesn't mean we never say or do things that offend or hurt others, but it does mean that we are not self-protective to the point where when we do hurt another person we don't feel the pain ourselves. Absorbing offense, insult, trauma and frustration rather than distributing these things will profoundly improve the quality of our proclamation of the good news and add living testimony to our verbal witness. This is why patience is one of the most needed and effective spiritual skills in the life

of a pastor (James 5:7-8). Yet patience is emotionally expensive. When we refrain from vengeance and decide to forgive, we absorb the cost and it hurts a lot (Romans 12:17-21). But that is the nature of Christ and even when He refused to tolerate some behaviors, He always paid the price for patience Himself (1 Peter 2:18-25).

#### ENDNOTES:

1. I am indebted to John Piper for this insight, but I can't remember where in his writings I found it. It has become part of the basic texture of my pastoral theology. It influences almost every pastoral interaction I have with suffering and desolated people. I don't just "preach it" to them. But I do seek to impress upon them that the Lord intercedes for them all the time in the midst of trials, and that all trials are "crises of faith" in one way or another.

2. John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, [Multnomah Books, 2003] p 269.

3. John Piper, *The Roots of Endurance*, [Crossway Books, 2002] p 19.

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