

# Practicing the Way

## Session Five

### Meeting God in Pain and Suffering

Last Sunday as part of the Practicing the Way series we looked at the Practices that Jesus did to sustain his spiritual life and from which we can learn. These practices are vehicles for spiritual transformation.

Sabbath	Prayer	Fasting	Solitude	Generosity
Scripture	Community	Service	Witness	

Check out the handout from last week's Tab Matters for more details and the transcript of last Sunday's sermon on the Tab website

<https://www.dursleytab.org.uk/wplive/sermons>

Yet in all honesty when I engage in some of the practices, such as solitude, prayer, fasting, I don't always find them peaceful. Sometimes I can be drawn into God's presence. But often when I slow down and come before God it allows all sorts of feelings and wounds and pains that have been pushed down, denied or detached from, to come to the surface. I spend that time unloading on God. It can be cathartic. It can ultimately be comforting and healing to recognise what has been going on in my life, to name it and to show it to God for God's help and the Spirit to lead me forward into freedom.

But it is not always comfortable.

As we continue our series looking at spiritual transformation, this week we will consider meeting God in pain and suffering. How do we process our emotional wounds and pains and seek God's healing and transformation? Sometimes it may take a wise and trusted friend or counsellor to help. But those who are hurt will often hurt others unless they process those pains.

Our unhealed emotional pains can sabotage our spiritual formation into people of love like Jesus.

Jesus once said, "In this world you will have trouble." Pain and suffering are inevitable in this life. Often, when we begin to practice the disciplines, the unhealed wounds of a lifetime rise to the surface of our hearts. Everything in us wants to run in the opposite direction — to deny, detach, or drug our pain. But the invitation of Jesus is to meet him in our pain and let it become the crucible of our formation.

**We can deny:** We don't have pain or problems. We can cope. We're OK. This strategy is made popular in Christian circles with spiritual denial being a denial of the problem. Just trust in God. Here's a comforting verse. Just have faith. It will all work out.

Spiritual bypassing uses spiritual practices to bypass unresolved emotional issues, psychological wounds and unfinished developmental tasks. Skip all that with being positive and having Christian hope.

It can work well and is an effective coping strategy. The problem is it is usually a short-term strategy and dangerous because of that.

You know if you have a pain in the body that doesn't go away (some do after a short while), if that pain persists then you need to realise there could be something seriously wrong, even life threatening and go and get it checked out.

Sigmund Freud said 'whatever we refuse to face in our inner lives has the most power over us'.

If we deny our inner life, especially those areas that need God's healing touch, there is usually destructive consequences to us and others.

**Second option is detachment.** Cut yourself off from any emotional pain. You freeze inside. Become unemotional. The danger with not allowing yourself to feel any sadness is that you may not feel any joy or wonder or gratitude because you are detaching yourself from all emotions – the positive as well as the negative ones.

**The third option of dealing with pain and suffering is to drug it.** Alcohol, cannabis, tobacco, other drugs and also more figuratively the drug of working longer, immersing yourself in a career or sex, romance, social media, entertainment and TV and films anything that can be a distraction from pain and being with God. Whatever the drug is it can give momentary relief from the pain, but ultimately it will make it worse.

None of these ways: deny, detach, drugs, are the Jesus way.

In the Garden of Gethesemne, the reading in Matthew 26, we have the most painful moment in Jesus life. The evening before he would go to the cross. Judas is betraying him. The disciples, his friends, would desert him, reject him, he would be handed over and humiliated, tortured and experience a horrible execution.

Did he deny what was going on? 'Other people have it worse. God has a plan!' No.

Did he detach? 'It is what it is. These things happen'. No.

Did he drug himself for the experience. 'Come on lads lets go out on the town for one last blowout'. No.

He goes to a quiet place to share with some of his closest friends.

*Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." —Matthew 26v36-39*

Notice that verse. *He began to be sorrowful and troubled.* Jesus intentionally makes space for all the feelings to come up and meets God in the pain by offering those feelings up to God in prayer. This is the practice of lament – so evident in the Book of Psalms. You tell it as it is to the Lord Almighty. *"My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death."* It is a key feature of emotionally healthy spirituality.

Surrender your heart again to God. Stop grasping for control and yield yourself to God and God's will for your life. You may want to pray Jesus' own prayer, "Not my will, but yours be done."

Pete Scazzero said it is impossible to be spiritually mature whilst remaining emotionally immature.

*Emotional maturity* will come when you're aware of your feelings, but you're not run by your feelings.

There is a useful Noticing and Naming your Emotions exercise in this week's handout.

When we notice and name our feelings, they have less power over us. If you were to name a painful emotion like fear, anger, disappointment, or jealousy, a brain scan would show that your very act of naming it helps to process quiets that emotion. This is why psychiatrist Dan Siegel encourages us to "name it to tame it."

So, for example, I am feeling Angry, But what kind of anger? Can I be more specific and identify what is making me angry. Can I accurately name the feeling of anger. Is it: Abused, Aggravated, Agitated, Anguished, Annoyed, Betrayed, Cheated, Coerced, Controlled, Deceived, Disgusted, Dismayed, Displeased, Dominated, Enraged, Exasperated, Exploited, Frustrated, Fuming?

Can you name it to tame it?

Because the next step having named it is then to not be run by your feelings. To find the capacity to sit with those feelings and let your body process them before God in prayer without them causing you to behave in unloving ways. Psychologists call it emotional regulation. The Bible calls it self-control.

That's the emotional journey – meeting God in pain. Being open to the Spirit of God to cleanse you, renew you, release you and help you find freedom.

Processing that pain with an older wiser loving soul can be deeply healing. You may need a therapist or a counsellor – that can be really helpful for deeper stuff. Make space to process. It is never instantaneous. It takes time, it can be a slow and even painful process but it can also be the crucible of formation.

If left, anger, bitterness, fear etc can fester in our souls and will undermine our best intentions to become like Jesus and develop into more loving versions of ourselves.

But there is good news. Jesus says in John 16 v 33

*'I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.'*

The cross and resurrection and ascension are powerful signs of victory and hope. It is what we are looking at in the Surprised by Hope sessions. It means even the worst things can be used for good. Our break downs can become our breakthroughs.

Paul in reflecting on the resurrection was able to say in Romans 8. 28

*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

James in his letter chapter one says: <sup>2</sup> *Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, <sup>3</sup> because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. <sup>4</sup> Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*

I think he is overegging it a bit to say, 'consider it pure joy!'

Paul in this reading from 2 Timothy says:

<sup>6</sup> *For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. <sup>7</sup> I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. <sup>8</sup> Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.*

*But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the*

*lion's mouth. <sup>18</sup>The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

For someone I know counselling turned out to be the key to help him process his pain and retain his faith. He had grown up in church and had come to faith in his mid-teens. But he was gay and couldn't square his sexual orientation with his Christian faith. People at his church put him through conversion therapy and tried to pray the gay away. That process even involved exorcism, deliverance from the demons they thought he had. This sent him into a nervous breakdown and suicidal thoughts. He was sectioned and admitted into a psychiatric unit.

But the breakdown led to a breakthrough. He found a compassionate Christian counsellor who gave him space to share his emotions and pain. To value him and his life and experiences. To help him find again the love of God. She made him meditate on the verse from John's gospel where Jesus says 'my peace I give to you'. He kept repeating it until it sank deep within his heart and transformed his life.

Through the crucible of pain and suffering he found wholeness and acceptance.

We do not seek suffering and pain. But if it finds us – meet God in it.

### **Closing prayer**

God of Gethsemane, who experiences and knows the pain of our condition, help us turn to you in the ache of our emotions when the day has turned to darkness, that we may know the liberation of your transforming love, not only by the calm waters' edge, but when we're traveling on the waters of the storms that life brings. Amen