

Under Construction

Week 4: Pain and Suffering

John 16:33

Well, we're in the final week of our Under Construction series, but that doesn't mean that we're packing up the tools just yet. Throughout the Fall, we're going to be dropping some episodes on our Podcast channel that go deeper into some of the things we explored during this series and even touch on some things that we didn't. So, keep an eye on those anywhere you get your Podcasts.

I heard John Mark Comer say one time that there are internal and external reasons for why people deconstruct their faith. Why they question their previously unquestioned beliefs. And so, **external reasons** are the things outside of a person like **broken trust of spiritual leaders**. Twenty years ago, most people inherently trusted pastors, but after all the news of scandals and abuse, that trust is all but gone. Especially in the younger generation. They've grown up in the middle of this reckoning in the church and it's *rightly* made them question people like me.

Low discipleship in the Church, what Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls "cheap grace." The church is more interested in filling the pews than making disciples and raising up followers of Jesus who are surrendered to Him.

And then there are the **cultural influences and ideologies** that are all around us. Ideas and practices that have replaced the way of Jesus, or are in contrast to it. And, most people are inundated with these narratives and agendas so much that they've just embraced them without question.

These are all external reasons why some people have taken a step back and questioned their beliefs or deconstructed their faith.

But then there are **internal reasons**. Things going on inside of us like **digital overload and low Scripture intake**. Our minds are saturated in digital input rather than Scripture and prayer and it's having a corrosive effect on our faith.

There's also a growing **Lack of Fear of God** within followers of Jesus. We want Christianity without the cross. We live in greater surrender to our flesh and its desires than we do to God and His. So, instead of walking in reverence with God, many of us are just turning our backs on him and walking away.

But then there's the third internal reason. And it's the one we're going to land on today. The third internal reason why so many people have deconstructed their faith, why so many have even walked away from their faith, is this...they experienced a **Wounded Heart**.

You experienced a wound from your religious upbringing and it shaped the way you think about God and the Church. Your religious parents put on a good face around others, but you knew

who they really were. Maybe a leader you trusted violated that trust and it was disorienting. You went through a painful experience in your life and it made you ask questions you never had to wrestle with before.

The truth is, I can't think of a single person I know who has deconstructed their faith that didn't have some kind of wound, including me. When my mom passed away in July of 2017, it left a deep wound in my heart. I was the lead minister at a struggling church plant in Rhode Island and my faith started to spiral. I was angry at God for allowing that to happen. Angry that we lived so far away for the last 3 years of her life.

I went through a crisis of faith during that time. We left the church in March of 2017 and moved into my in-laws basement. It was a time of questioning my previously unquestioned beliefs about God and His goodness. It all left me wondering what was next, not just for my family, but for my faith that was just barely hanging on.

So, if you resonate with this idea of a wounded heart causing you to deconstruct your faith, I want you to know, I get it. There are people in this room who get it. I almost walked away. But three months of living in my in-laws basement with no job and no direction gave me a lot of time to think, which wasn't always a good thing.

During that time, though, I realized I'd developed certain beliefs about God that, I wouldn't say were part of my theology...like, I wouldn't SAY that I believed them, but I was certainly acting like it. To use the language of this series, I had put up pillars that weren't in the blueprints.

I realized I was operating under the belief that God caused my pain. Not that He caused my mom to die from her disease, but that he caused my pain of not being closer and more available to her by calling us to serve at a church so far away. I pointed the finger at Him and said, "That's your fault."

I'd put up a pillar that said God didn't care about my pain, or if he did, then He wasn't able to do anything about it. If God loved me, if God loved my mom, then He would have stepped in to do something. But, He didn't. And, I was left wondering is it because He could, but didn't want to, or He wanted to, but couldn't?

18th century philosopher, David Hume, was skeptical about the existence of God. He stated the classic problem of evil and suffering like this: "Is God willing to prevent evil and suffering, but unable to do so? Then He's not omnipotent. Is God able to prevent evil and suffering, but unwilling to do so? Then He's malevolent. Is He both willing and able? Whence then is evil?"

In other words, if God is both willing and able to prevent suffering, then why does it still exist? Hume's conclusion is that they exist because God doesn't. At least not a good, loving, and kind God. It's a philosophical conclusion to a deeply philosophical question..but it also represented a pillar that was starting to take shape in my faith. I was questioning the goodness of God.

And, what I learned during that time, and continue to learn now, is that, for most of us, when we're suffering, we're not interested in a philosophical discussion about our pain. There's a time and a place for that, but when we're in it, that's not what we need. For most of us, suffering is more personal than it is philosophical. So, if suffering is intensely personal, then any meaningful response to suffering must be personal as well.

Several years ago, our daughter, Norah, was climbing on some bars. Going up and down, swinging around on them. All the sudden, her hands slipped and she started to fall. Not far, but enough. And, on her way down, her chin hit one of the bars, she bit her tongue, and it immediately started to bleed. And, as a parent, you can always tell how bad it is based on the amount of time between the thing that happened and the tears that follow. The longer that time, the worse it is. After a little while, she just exploded in tears.

I scooped her up and we assessed the damage. I was afraid she was going to be missing teeth or need stitches. Fortunately, it wasn't anything like that, just a severely bitten tongue on the top and bottom.

But, you know what I noticed...when Norah started crying, she wasn't crying for a band-aid. She wasn't crying out, saying, "We need to apply pressure!" She also didn't look at me and try to analyze the situation. She wasn't like "Father, what's the purpose of this pain I'm feeling in my tongue right now? Is God punishing me for something? If He's good, why did He cause this to happen?"

Again, all of those questions have their place, but in her moment of pain, Norah wasn't looking for a solution, she wasn't looking for a reason, she was longing for a person. She was crying out for her daddy...*actually, she was crying out for her mommy, but I'm the one telling the story!* The point is, she was crying out for *someone* to pick her up, give her a hug, and help her feel better.

The same is true for us. When we're in the middle of pain and suffering and we're hurting, philosophy doesn't cut it. You're not looking for a reason, you're longing for a person. Since pain is personal, the response must be personal, too. And what I found during that time in my in-laws basement is that **Jesus is God's incredibly personal answer to our intensely personal pain.**

If you have a Bible, or a Bible app, turn to John 16:33 with me.

Jesus didn't mince words when it came to the pain we'd experience in this world. What we see in the Gospels, the accounts of his life and ministry, is that Jesus didn't try to give reasons for the pain. He didn't cast blame on people for their suffering, saying it was their fault and God was punishing them for something. All of those philosophical pillars that we want to put up to explain suffering and pain and what it must mean about the character and nature of God, Jesus tears them down.

God's ultimate response to suffering isn't an explanation; it's Jesus. It's the incarnation. God, taking on flesh, stepping into our pain with us. Something He continues to do today. Look at our verse. Jesus says...(READ Jn. 16:33a)

Let's stop there and get some context. What did Jesus tell them to bring them peace? Well, he'd just got done saying I'm going away, I'm about to suffer and die. But, here's the thing...it's not just me. Things aren't looking too good for you guys, either. You're going to be scattered. You're going to abandon me and each other. You're about to experience some things that will make you grieve. And then, he finishes it off by saying, "I tell you that so you can have peace."

That's like me saying, "Hey, when you get home today, you'll find that your dog had explosive diarrhea. I tell you this so you may have peace." What?!

But, notice the nuance of what Jesus says. He says, "I have told you these things so that *in me* you may have peace!" Our peace is not held in the balance of our constantly changing circumstances. Our peace is held in the unchanging promises of Jesus. Look at what Jesus says about his peace a couple of chapters earlier. This is towards the beginning of the same conversation and he's talking about the Holy Spirit filling those who follow Him. Jesus says...(READ)

Did you see that? Jesus does not give us peace the way the world gives us peace. Any close friend can sympathize with you, sit beside you and comfort you. That is good and we need it, but we need more. The peace of the world encourages us. It empathizes with us. But, the peace of God empowers us. Though the Holy Spirit, God's peace fills our bones with courage and resilience. In tough times, we need friends who will come and sit by us, but we need the peace of God and the Holy Spirit to empower us even more.

So, back to our text, Jesus says...(READ Jn. 16:33)

Not, you might, but you will have trouble. No one gets out of life without some wounds on their heart. You will experience pain, suffering, loss. You will go through heartache, betrayal, sickness and disease. It's all part of what it means to be human.

And, when your heart is wounded, you have a choice. You can walk through those times on your own, turning your back on God because of them. Or, you can turn to Him and receive His peace that surpasses all understanding. Turn to him and find what holocaust survivor, Corrie ten Boom, wrote, "No matter how deep our darkness, he is deeper still."

God's peace filled me during that time in my in-law's basement. Jesus met me in my darkest moment, and over the course of time, I came to realize that it was my expectation of God that let me down, not God. I started deconstructing the pillars I'd put up and reinforcing the ones in the blueprints. It's a process I'm still going through.

And, what I'm learning might be something that helps you if a wounded heart is making you question your faith. I'd encourage you to **question your expectations of God before you question the goodness of God.** Really ask yourself, is God letting me down, or are my expectations of God, expectations He never agreed to, letting me down?

Jesus never promised a pain free life. In fact, it was the exact opposite. But, he did promise to meet you in the darkness of your pain and give you peace. What's more, he tells us to take heart because he has overcome the world. Through his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus has conquered sin and death and we can, too, when we put our faith in Him.

Because of the hope we have, the Apostle Paul says in **2 Corinthians 4:16-18...(READ)**

Our times of pain and suffering, which feel so heavy and permanent right now, are light and momentary compared to the eternal glory that God is preparing for us through Jesus. And you might hear that and say, "But Paul, you have no idea what I'm going through and how much this pain hurts."

To which, I think Paul would reply, "You're right, but WE have no idea how glorious the New Heaven and New Earth will be. We have no idea how temporary our pain is compared to an eternity of blessing and joy."

Until that day, may we fix our eyes on Jesus who stepped into our pain and promises to give us peace.