



Grief Attached to Hope: A Guide to Navigating Suffering When Theology Seems Senseless

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In seminaries and colleges around the world, theologians enjoy creating nicely constructed theologies about life, the universe, and everything. Scholars examine scripture and create theologies on everything about God, but even when these theologies are correct trials test them to the breaking point. Traumatic events often break the wheels off of this theology and threaten to destroy it entirely. As ministers, this often puts us in a perplexing situation. We were taught these refined, pretty theologies. However, when counseling a mass shooting victim who struggles with whether God exists, telling him/her Anselm's ontological argument for the existence of God may seem like a waste of time. The raw emotional nature of these events makes our intellectual musings, even if correct, often seem irrelevant. There is a great need for theology specifically geared towards navigating these events and specifically how we interact with and in them. With Biblical approaches to trauma and God's nature taken into consideration, this essay proposes a few ideas on how to interact with suffering in ministry with a special focus in pastoral counseling. Lamentations provides an outline on how trauma needs to be addressed and Christ's example fashions the image that we need to look like as ministers.

Jeremiah witnessed the siege of Jerusalem and records his traumatic experience in the book of Lamentations. He described in vivid detail the horrors he witnessed and commented on his own desolation. In chapter 3 he talked about how he "dwell in

darkness” (v. 6), how he is filled with bitterness (v. 15), and even how he “has forgotten what happiness is” (v.17). His experience was truly traumatizing and his poetic language reflects his overwhelming horror.

In all of this pain, in all of this horror, the book’s acrostic structure¹ directs the reader to the point of the whole book: Lamentations 3:22-33. This chapter is a hopeful praise of God and reveals that even in the midst of a terrifying and traumatic experience we can still praise God. Part of the trauma therapy experience is grieving over the experience(s) in order to heal². This is what Jeremiah did in the entire entire book. Four out of five of the poems in this book are dirges, and they highlight his grief over Jerusalem.³ However Jeremiah’s praise in 3:22-33 is not haphazard nor coincidence. It proves that when we are grieving a traumatic experience we need to place the Lord our Healer in the center of our lives. This is what we need to do in ministry.

Denice Colson, a trauma therapist, spent many years searching for the right program for her patients. Counseling trauma is different from counseling other issues, as the patient needs a much more structured approach to ensure proper healing. Most of the techniques are too fluid in approach, possibly leading a counselee to having a re-traumatizing experience by flooding them with more emotions than they can handle.⁴ After years of research, she finally had a structured trauma therapy program with a spiritual emphasis. She knew that trauma therapy “is a tool that God can use to bring

¹ Arnold, Bill T., and Bryan E. Beyer. *Encountering the Old Testament*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008. Pg. 408

² Colson, Denice A. *Stop Treating Symptoms and Start Resolving Trauma*. Bloomington, IN: Authorhouse, 2004. Page 74.

³ Gray, C P. *Beacon Bible Commentary*. Vol. 4. Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1969. P. 504

⁴ Colson. *Stop Treating Symptoms and Start Resolving Trauma*. pg. 4

healing in individuals and families.”⁵ True healing comes from God, and this is what made her particular trauma program effective. Her program essentially follows the reasoning provided in Lamentations, that we need to grieve over trauma but have God be our focus while doing so.

Effective therapy that resolves trauma is much needed and the results are overwhelmingly positive. Colson described her experience counseling non-Christians and explained how the resolution of trauma allows them to see their need for God. This is because with the massive pain resulting from trauma gone, they tend to develop a spiritual hunger. She looks at the parable of the sower and compares trauma therapy to preparing soil for healthy growth.⁶ As ministers, part of our job is to watch people and help them have good soil. Effective trauma therapy is a great way to help people grow to be more Christ-like, resolving trauma and enabling people to lead more fulfilling lives.

Christ himself is the perfect example of how ministers are to act with a trauma victim. In John 11 Lazarus dies, and Jesus goes to the people who are grieving. He saw everyone sobbing, and in the truest empathy feels their pain. John 11:35, that infamously simple verse declares, “Jesus wept.” We all know how this story ends, that Jesus raises Lazarus from the grave. Before this in verse 11:4, we see that Jesus knew from the start that this was His plan. Therefore, why would he cry, when He knows this story will have a great outcome?

He cries because of empathy. Even though Lazarus will wake up once again, his friends and family’s pain over his loss is still nevertheless real. Jesus recognizes this and

⁵ Colson. *Stop Treating Symptoms and Start Resolving Trauma*. Pg. 9

⁶ Colson. *Stop Treating Symptoms and Start Resolving Trauma..* Pg. 9-10

responds accordingly. Before Jesus starts crying, John 11:33 shows how seeing people so grieved and upset deeply moves his spirit. His deep empathy and passion for people causes Him to be sensitive to other's emotional state. When that emotional state is one of pain and suffering, He feels pain with us.

Many people ask about the problem of pain, how could a loving God let people be in so much pain? There is a theological answer to this. That answer is similar to a parent disciplining a child. If a child's crime constantly goes unpunished, that child will grow up with no discipline. This is actually an unloving act for the parent, if a parent wants their child to do well then they discipline their child. It might hurt the child but it is for their own good. It is like that with God and us. There has to be some consequence for our sin, or we would never learn. Some of the pain of this world is appointed by God, but not all of it.

There is also the pain in the world created by sinful people. These are the people who lash out at us, even if we are innocent. They abuse us for no reason at all. This kind of pain will happen to good and bad people alike. C. S. Lewis explains how most of the pain in this world is caused by sinful people.⁷ Because of this we cannot blame God for this pain, since it is not His fault. Indeed, it happened to God Himself; when Christ came down to Earth there were many evil people who hurt Him. However since God could have stopped people from hurting others, people still get angry at God. He understands that though this is painful and what people are doing is unjust, He will bring justice even if the victim does not witness it. In a world with free will, people are going to use that

⁷ Lewis, Clive S. *The Problem of Pain*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1940. Pg. 86

freedom to hurt others. It would not be “free will” if people did not have the freedom to hurt each other.

There are other kinds of pain in this world for instance the pain coming from natural disasters, however they do not need to be told in detail. This much has already given a couple of examples regarding the theology of pain. Though these theological reasons exist, they do little to satisfy many people I meet, especially a person asking from a painful event in their life. For instance, if a woman who has followed God all her life and blameless before the Lord loses her baby, she may ask, “How is this fair? Why would God let bad things happen to good people?” In this instance, it is likely that she is asking this not in a merely intellectual pursuit, she is really asking, “Why would God let this happen to me?” Is a theological expounding on the effects of sin is what they need? Maybe. Counseling involves so many grey areas and is so dependent upon the individual person that I cannot give a clear “no” to answer that question. However I would highly consider a different route, as a theological answer is likely not what this woman is looking for. What she may need is to feel heard, and like someone is on her side in the injustice of this world.

I take Christ as my guide in this. When that woman sits sobbing before me, it is often better to gently say that God is crying with her. God sees how upset she is, He knows the injustice of this event, and He is crying with her over this. But we also want to point her to joy in God, that even during our suffering we can rejoice in God. This is where we could remind her that her beautiful child is with God, and He cherishes her and loves her and cares for her more than anyone else is capable of. We also need to consider an alternate situation though; sometimes it is more comforting to the person to give them

the more intellectual theological answer than the more emotional based one. This is something that would partly depend on the counselee's personality, if they are a person more swayed by intellectual reasoning or emotional appeals. In addition, a counselor can never ignore the Holy Spirit's leading in this situation. Deciding which one is better for each situation is something that can only be done then.

The example of Christ's empathy teaches us to empathize in ministry, how we are not to avoid suffering with others but to embrace it. This is not only right to cry with those who are crying; it is Christ-like. We don't want this to impede our ability to minister, but sometimes someone seeing you just as upset as they are does more for them than anything you can say. Empathy is one of the most powerful tools that we have, and the power of it lies in this: it makes the person feel understood.⁸ In a world where so much is lost in communication, this is an invaluable, necessary tool for us to use.

The verse 1st Thessalonians 4:13 teaches us that our grief is attached to hope. We do not grieve as non-believers grieve, for we have Jesus Christ. This verse specifically talks about grieving over someone's death, which is one experience we will counsel in ministry. Thankfully though, we can hope in all traumatic experiences as we have a God who is our protector, healer, counselor and lover. This is true as we encounter struggles in ministry and as we counsel.

This hope though can seem elusive. A common trend that I see in trauma survivors is the struggle for hope. It is very easy to feel alone, that no one else understands your pain. It is easy to believe that you are never going to get better; that nightmarish visions will haunt you forever. Both Lamentations and John 11:33 destroy

⁸ Stein, Steven J., Howard E. Book, and Korrel Kanoy. *The Student EQ Edge*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013. Pg. 137

this lie. Lamentations shows us how to grieve, and tells us in 3:31-33 says “Lord will not cast off forever”, and continues to detail the Lord’s compassion. It is a Biblical idea that hope comes in the morning (Psalm 30:5); trauma victims need this repeated. Say it as many times as needed, find various ways to phrase it, subtly slip it into conversation, just be sure to communicate this repeatedly.

John 11:33 also destroys this lie by the very fact that Jesus is weeping. No matter how long a counselee explains their story, describing every detail or acting out every emotion, I am never going to understand that experience like they do. There is no counselor on Earth who can truly understand another person’s pain. Thankfully though, we have a God who does. That is why Jesus weeps with everyone around Him, it is because He knows their pain. He knows how hurt they are, and He feels the grief they do.

As ministers, we cannot ever feel another’s pain as they feel it. Sure, we can empathize and do the best we can, but there is only so much we can do. Thankfully through the Holy Spirit we can can empathize even if we do not completely understand their pain. When we are counseling someone who is broken and admits feeling like no one understands, we can say, “You’re right, I don’t understand. Neither do your friends nor family. However there is one person who understands: God. He’s the only being who understands the depth of your pain, and Christ the only man who can truly weep with you.”

This is an invaluable resource in counseling. There is a sense of truth when a trauma victim feels like no one understands, because no one understands except God. Yet again I am reminded of Lamentation’s message, that at the heart of our grief must be

hope in God. He is the only light that can shine forth through the darkness of pain. As such, we need to remember this when someone is struggling with trauma.

As ministers, we are on the front lines of suffering. We are working with the homeless who can't find a warm place to sleep in the snow; with the couple who just lost their baby in an accident, we are working with the family that's being torn apart by pornography. The more we pursue ministry the more we are going to encounter suffering. Every single minister will eventually follow Christ's example in John 11:35 and weep. We are to have an empathetic approach to suffering, crying with people while we point them to joy in God. Jesus' grief and Lamentation's joy show us how we are to approach grief in ministry. Even those who will not do any counseling, this is still a good outline of how to interact with those who are suffering. During times greatly filled with this suffering, theology does tend to fall apart and not to make sense. Thankfully we have Christ's example that sheds a light in this dark and troubling time.

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