WEEK 1: THE THREAT OF PAIN

Mixed LIFEGROUP

STEP 1 SERMON RECAP

Sunday opened a series on the problem and power of pain. God has fixed the pain and suffering problem through Jesus, but He has not done it on our timeline or by our methods, and that gap is where people walk away from Him. Here is the sermon in five lines:

1. **The Big Idea:** Misunderstood and mismanaged pain threatens salvation. In Jesus' parable of the soils, pain can drive a person away from God, and pleasure can drag a person away (Luke 8:13-14).
2. **What God has already done:** Jesus has purchased everything we long for: a new heaven and a new earth with no more tears, death, or pain. The problem is fixed, but the fix is not finished yet (Revelation 21:1-4).
3. **Five sources of pain:** (1) spiritual evil, (2) other people's sin, folly, or negligence, (3) my sin, folly, or negligence, (4) God's discipline, and (5) disease, disaster, and accidents in a sin-infected world.
4. **The guardrail:** Do not beat yourself up over pain that belongs to the fifth category, and do not dodge responsibility for pain that belongs to the third (Proverbs 19:3; John 9:3).
5. **Where it lands:** If you do not get an explanation you like on the timeline you like, are you going to forfeit everything promised in the world to come? Continue in the faith, because "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22).

STEP 2 ACCOUNTABILITY AND CHECK-IN

Go around the table for the accountability and check-in. In order to avoid over-talking and dominating conversation, keep each answer to about one minute.

- How did it go with the "I Will" statement you made last week? What were the key ingredients of success or failure? (1 minute)
- What is one thing you are thankful for this week? (1 minute)
- What is one challenge you are facing right now? (1 minute)

STEP 3 ONE PERSON READS IDEA 1 ALOUD

In order to optimize time, do not discuss until the end. While this is read, circle or star anything God points out (John 16:8, 13).

Each idea below ends with the same situation handled three different ways. Your situation may not be the one described. So translate the principle underneath it into your own situation.

IDEA 1: Pain can drive you away from God, and pleasure can drag you away.

Luke 8:13-15

And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away. 14 And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. 15 As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.

Both the rocky soil and the thorny soil receive the word, but neither one keeps it. On the rock, faith has "no root," so it lasts "for a while" and then falls away when testing comes. Among the thorns, the seed is "choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life," which means comfort can kill faith as surely as suffering can. The good soil is not the soil that avoided trouble. Jesus says it holds the word fast "in an honest and good heart" and bears fruit "with patience." Hard seasons expose shallow roots, and easy seasons do too. The goal is to bear fruit in all seasons.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE, SIMILAR SITUATION, THREE PEOPLE:

- **Negative:** One woman has owned a landscaping business for eleven years. When a property management company that owes her $40,000 declares bankruptcy, she is forced to close her business. She feels betrayed by God, believing her years of tithing and hard work should have protected her from financial ruin. Rather than bringing her disappointment before God, she stops attending church and tells her husband, "I've spent years being faithful to God, and this is what I get in return."
- **Positive:** A man loses his construction business under similar circumstances. He is angry, afraid, and uncertain about how he will provide for his family. Rather than withdrawing from God and his church community, he shares his struggles with the people at his Life Group table and asks for prayer. He takes a job on another construction crew to support his family and continues trusting God as he works to rebuild.
- **Looks fine but:** A third woman's landscaping business survives a client's bankruptcy because she has enough savings to cover the loss. She thanks God for providing, but the experience leaves her determined never to be financially vulnerable again. Within a year, she is working most Sundays and has not opened her Bible in months. She justifies her long hours as necessary to provide for her family, but her pursuit of financial security has gradually taken priority over her relationship with God.

SAMPLE "I WILL"

I will tell one person in this group where pain or comfort has been pulling me away from God, and ask them to check on me before the end of the week.

NOTES

STEP 4 A SECOND PERSON READS IDEA 2 ALOUD

In order to optimize time, do not discuss until the end. While this is read, circle or star anything God points out (John 16:8, 13).

IDEA 2: Continuing in the faith does not wait on an explanation.

Acts 14:19-22

But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. 20 But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. 21 When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, 22 strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.

Paul had been preaching about Jesus in cities across what is now Turkey, and opponents from two of those cities followed him to Lystra to stop him. They stoned him and dragged his body outside the city, thinking he was dead. The next day he got up and left for Derbe, and after preaching there, he went back to Lystra and to the very cities his attackers came from. Paul never got an explanation for the stoning beyond what Jesus had already told His followers to expect (John 15:18-21), but he did not need one to keep going. His message to the new believers was to "continue in the faith," because "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." Tribulation is not evidence that God has abandoned you. According to Paul, it is part of the road into the kingdom.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE, SIMILAR SITUATION, THREE PEOPLE:

- **Negative:** At sixty-two, one man's father is diagnosed with early-onset dementia. For two years, he prays for healing, but his father's condition continues to worsen. He feels abandoned by God, believing that his persistent prayers should have brought healing. Rather than bringing his disappointment before God, he stops praying and attending Life Group, telling the men there is nothing left to discuss. His unmet expectations have driven him away from God and the people who could support him.
- **Positive:** Another woman faces a similar situation after two years of praying for her father's healing with no improvement. She is grieving, frustrated, and struggling to understand why God has not answered as she hoped. Rather than withdrawing, she honestly brings her struggles before God, continuing to pray for healing while asking for strength to care for her father. She remains involved in Life Group, allowing others to walk alongside her through the hardship.
- **Hard to admit:** A third man faces a similar situation but continues attending church and serving regularly. Others praise him for his strength, unaware that he has not prayed about his father in over a year. Afraid to confront his anger and disappointment, he fills his time with ministry rather than bringing his struggles before God. What appears to be faithfulness has become a way to avoid the very God he claims to be serving.

SAMPLE "I WILL"

I will write down the one prayer I stopped praying because God did not answer it the way I wanted, and I will pray it again every day this week.

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STEP 5 A THIRD PERSON READS IDEA 3 ALOUD

In order to optimize time, do not discuss until the end. While this is read, circle or star anything God points out (John 16:8, 13).

IDEA 3: Own what is yours, and refuse to carry what is not.

Proverbs 19:3

When a man's folly brings his way to ruin, his heart rages against the LORD.

Proverbs is a book of short wisdom sayings, many of them from King Solomon, that describe how life usually works. This one describes a sequence: a person's own folly ruins their life, and then they turn around and rage against the LORD for the ruin. That is Sunday's third category, pain caused by my own sin, folly, or negligence. It is actually a hopeful category, because what you caused, you can stop causing. Still, Sunday also drew a guardrail. When the disciples asked whether a man's blindness came from his sin or his parents' sin, Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents" (John 9:3). Wisdom sorts pain honestly in both directions.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE, SIMILAR SITUATION, THREE PEOPLE:

- **Negative:** At forty-five, one man's doctor tells him his blood pressure and blood sugar are dangerously high. For twenty years, he has eaten poorly and avoided exercise. Rather than admit his fear or acknowledge his choices, he tells his wife the doctor is overreacting and blames his family history. When a friend at church expresses concern, he dismisses it, saying, "God will take me when it's my time."
- **Positive:** Another woman receives a similar diagnosis from her doctor after years of poor eating habits and little exercise. She acknowledges that her choices have contributed to her declining health. She tells her husband she needs to make changes, begins preparing healthier meals, and commits to walking every morning before work. Rather than making excuses, she takes responsibility for what she can change.
- **Easy to justify:** A third woman receives a similar diagnosis, despite twenty years of healthy eating and regular exercise. Her doctor explains that her condition is largely genetic. Rather than accepting this, she believes God is punishing her for sins committed before she came to Christ. She calls this "taking responsibility," but she is carrying guilt for sins God has already forgiven and assuming her illness is punishment for them.

SAMPLE "I WILL"

I will sort one painful situation in my life into one of Sunday's five categories and ask one person in this group to help me test my answer before the end of the week.

NOTES

STEP 6 NOW DISCUSS

Go around the table.

Which item that you circled or starred stood out to you most and why?

STEP 7 WRITE YOUR "I WILL" STATEMENT

What is a practical, measurable, tangible step you can take to apply this information this next week?

STEP 8 PRAY

Pray for the person on your right by name, and for the "I Will" they just wrote.