THE PROBLEM AND POWER OF PAIN
WEEK 3 • DAILY BRIEFING 4 • BITTER OR BETTER

WEEKLY MEMORY VERSE

James 1:2–4

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, [3]for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. [4]And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

This week follows Sunday's sermon, "Purpose & Possibility in Pain." You can watch or listen to the sermon at 1mso.church or on the One Missoula app.

OPENING PRAYER

Heavenly Father, I want to become the person You created and called me to be, not the person the world tells me to be. Use the pain in my life to make me better by Your definition, and keep me from becoming bitter from the trials I face. In Jesus' name I pray, amen.

TODAY'S TEACHING

On Sunday we said that pain does not automatically make anyone better. Pain will push you down one of two roads: you will become bitter, or you will become better. Today we look at both roads, starting with what "better" actually means, because God and the self-help world both use that concept and mean very different things by it.

The self-help world sells the best version of you all day long: "Buy this book or sign up for this program, and it will help you become the best version of yourself." That takes discernment, because God is after the best version of you too, but the two are on different paths. Discernment is knowing the difference not only between right and wrong but also between right and almost right. A lot of self-help falls into the category of almost right. The difference is the motive and the end result. The world's concept of "the best version of yourself" ends with you at the center, which is the oldest temptation in the Bible: "you will be like God" (Genesis 3:5).

THE ROAD TO BETTER

God is after the best version of you, but it is the version that glorifies Him instead of you (1 Corinthians 10:31) and serves others instead of yourself (Philippians 2:3–4). The best version of you is putting sin to death (Romans 8:13) and growing in wisdom (Luke 2:52). It is growing in the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23), making disciples (Matthew 28:19), and living as salt and light (Matthew 5:13–16). It takes care of your body as the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19–20), and it manages money through hard work (Ephesians 4:28) and contentment rather than consumerism (Philippians 4:11–12).

Along with His Word and His Spirit, pain is one of God's main tools for producing that version of you. On Sunday we saw that He prunes fruitful branches so they bear more fruit (John 15:2) and that trials produce steadfastness (James 1:3). The apostle Paul learned this firsthand. Writing to the church he started in the Greek city of Corinth, he described a season of suffering in Asia, the region that is now western Turkey, that was so severe he thought he was going to die.

2 Corinthians 1:8–9

For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. [9]Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.

Answer these honestly. This is between you and God, and nobody else needs to see what you write.

Paul is honest about how bad it got.

1. Fill in the blank from 2 Corinthians 1:9: “But that was to make us rely not on _____ but on God who raises the dead.”

What was God building in Paul through his pain?

Self-help aims to make you more self-reliant. God was making Paul more God-reliant, which is why Paul could later write, “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed” (2 Corinthians 4:8). That is what better looks like.

The world’s version and God’s version can look alike from the outside.

2. Where have you been chasing the world’s version of the best you instead of God’s?

What is your motive underneath that pursuit?

THE ROAD TO BITTER

The other road shows up in the book of Ruth, set in Israel more than a thousand years before Jesus. A famine drove a woman named Naomi, her husband, and their two sons from Bethlehem to the neighboring country of Moab (Ruth 1:1). Over about ten years there, her husband died, and then both of her sons died (Ruth 1:3–5). Naomi decided to go home, and her daughter-in-law Ruth refused to leave her: “Your people shall be my people, and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16). The name Naomi means “pleasant,” and “Mara” means “bitter.”

Ruth 1:19–21

So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said, “Is this Naomi?” 20She said to them, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. 21I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?”

Naomi did not hide what she felt.

3. Fill in the blank from Ruth 1:20: “call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very _____ with me.”

What is the difference between telling God honestly how much it hurts and becoming bitter?

Naomi took her grief straight to God and said it out loud, and the Bible never scolds her for it. Many of the Psalms do the same thing. Bitterness is different. It settles in and turns against God and other people, which is why Paul wrote, “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you” (Ephesians 4:31).

Naomi’s story did not end in chapter 1. Ruth went to work gathering leftover grain in the field of a relative named Boaz, and Boaz eventually married her (Ruth 2–4). When their son was born, the women of Bethlehem said to Naomi, “Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a redeemer” (Ruth 4:14), and Naomi held the baby on her lap (Ruth 4:16).

4. What does that tell you about what God was doing while Naomi felt empty?

That baby was Obed, the grandfather of King David (Ruth 4:17), and Jesus would come from that same family line (Matthew 1:5). Naomi could not see any of it from Bethlehem in chapter 1. Not every loss ends with a restored family in this life, but God was working on a global and eternal scale the whole time she felt empty.

Bitter is usually what happens when you do nothing. Better has to be chosen and pursued.

5. Since your hardest season, have you grown more Christlike, or more hardened and harsh?

6. What is one way you could choose the road to better instead of the road to bitter this week?

PRAYER

Bring what you just wrote to God. Write your prayer or pray out loud.

MEMORY VERSE

Write or recite James 1:2–4 from memory.