

TRAUMA AND THE TREASURE OF CHRIST

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Can I let you in on a little secret? There are people in your church who are struggling with trauma. Maybe you can't see it as you gather together on a Sunday or in a small group—or these days through Zoom. But there are people all around you who have experienced something so horrific, so painful, so shameful, that it crowds into their present life, no matter how long ago it happened.

Trauma reaches out of the past and grips them with all the emotion, dread, and adrenaline-charging panic they faced when that horrible event first happened. It can feel like it is happening over and over and over. Maybe their trauma traces back to an experience of abuse or assault, maybe from a devastating event in their lives, or a violent or tragic event experienced while serving in the military or as a first responder.

Whatever the original event, they may manage life despite it, but it never leaves them. They live with an unrelenting sense that they can run from it, but they can't hide from it.

Maybe that person you know is you.

If so, I'd like to offer you a few thoughts that may help you navigate out of the grip of trauma and into safer days. Of course, these are not steps to instant freedom; they're more like handles to hold onto in the journey. But, ultimately, we discover that Jesus speaks to our trauma and leads us on the long path of renewal and hope.

Understanding the Struggle

First, trauma is usually understood not as what happened but how what happened affects you now. Trauma is the aftershock effect of a life-arresting event. Not everyone responds to horrible events the same way. Some cope better than others. Some find help where others suffer alone. Some can channel the reverberating effects of traumatic experiences into productive

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expression. For example, it is said that the actor Jimmy Stewart came back from his experience watching friends get shot out of the sky as a bomber pilot in World War II and learned to push those experiences into his acting in a way that helped him navigate through life.

Another thought to consider is this. What is traumatic to me may not affect

you the same way. That's why we must be careful not to compare trauma. In this way, trauma is a bit like grief. Just as there is no 'typical' experience of grief, there is no 'typical' experience of trauma. Lots of factors go into what makes a life event a trauma experience. How it happened, when it happened, what kind of support we receive after it happens, what kind of helpful or unhelpful strategies we bring to it, how it plays into other elements of our story, all shape a trauma experience.

There is no 'my trauma is worse than yours' comparison chart. When we go down that road, one of two things will happen. We may become convinced that our trauma is worse, and therefore no one can understand or help us. Or we may feel like other peoples' trauma is more legit than ours, and all that does is compound our struggle with shame.

A third thought, and this may be hard to consider. Identifying and validating experiences as trauma only gets us so far. There is a tendency to diagnose

trauma like a disease—something you have. Trauma has physical manifestations, but it is not just a physical phenomenon. Yes, our brains are involved and our adrenaline glands—really, a trauma response is a full-body experience. And, yes, medication can help mitigate our physical responses. But to simply treat trauma like a disease or medical condition is to replace you as an embodied person with a soulless, defective chemical machine.

Also, the term *trauma* is used an awful lot these days. At its base, trauma is a description, not an answer. A cultural rule of thumb can be helpful here: when any descriptive term becomes in vogue, it tends to lose power in its meaning. If I can classify any unpleasant experience as traumatic, then I can identify any single event as a trigger. Where that leads is endless self-protection, habitual victimization, and a craving for validation of our personal experience, which is a hole best left un-dug.

The Trauma of the Cross

If I've got your attention, you may be saying, "So pastor, what do you offer?" Well, my pastoral answer, of course, is I offer Jesus. But what does that mean? Does saying, "The answer is Jesus" get me any farther than saying, "The problem is trauma?" Absolutely, because at the heart of Jesus is a heart to deal with trauma.

Think about it like this: Jesus came to experience trauma. Read the trauma story of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53. The cross checks all the boxes of a traumatic event. It was horrible. It was evil. It was premeditated. It was humiliating. It was isolating. It was crushing. You have in Jesus one who is intimately familiar with trauma.

But there are some things about the trauma of the cross that move beyond how Jesus can identify with our trauma to how he can transform it. First, Jesus welcomed his trauma. Read the passion narrative of Matthew 26–27. He embraced the trauma of the cross; he moved toward it, he offered himself up to it.

God became flesh to move relentlessly toward the deadly trauma of the cross. Why? Because that's exactly what you needed him to do. That's exactly what I needed him to do.

You see, the fundamental trauma that shapes us all is our corruption due to

sin. Our lives apart from Christ are an endless reverberation of the self-traumatizing effects of the fall in Genesis 3. Genesis 3 is fundamentally the story of our rebellion against God. But Genesis 3 is also about the effects of that rebellion: the loss of innocence, the loss of identity, the loss of blessedness, the loss of love, all in one tragic moment that couldn't be taken back. This is where all people do their coping, their escaping, their self-medicating, their self-justifying—the trauma of sin-guilt is the great problem underlying everything else we experience in life. Read Romans 1 and see the effects of the trauma of the fall. Jesus came to address that trauma once and for all.

Your Life is a Story of Redemption

If you have received the gift of forgiveness of sin in the atoning death of Jesus, you have a re-written story. It is a story of grace and mercy. It is a story of power and light and life in Christ. Read John 1:1–18 to see the introduction to your new story. Is it a story of “bad things won't happen to me now?” No. Jesus didn't come to prevent bad things; he came to overcome them, to redeem them, to turn them into the stuff of glory. Read the long, glorious run-on sentence about God's grace to you in Ephesians 1:3–14.

Reject Jesus? Bad things will happen to you, and you will cope until you die. And you will live in fear of inevitable judgment the whole way. Receive Jesus? Bad things will happen, but never without a place in the story of redemption, never without strength to endure, never without meaning. And then, yes, your time here will end in death—it always does. But with that end, all trauma will cease, and you will live free of tears and full of joy.

Read about your glorious forever-future in Revelation 21:1–5. Trauma has an end. It will, like death itself, be swallowed up in victory (1 Cor. 15:54–56).

If you struggle with trauma now, there are helpful things you can do to battle it and manage it. You can't do it alone, but you can do it. Your friends can help, as can your pastor, a sound biblical counselor, perhaps a wise medical practitioner. But don't lose sight of the more profound work taking place. There is a deeper thing going on in your life below the trauma. Paul describes it like this:

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look

not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal (1 Cor. 4:16-18).

That's the work of the Spirit renewing you day by day. The power of God's Word is replacing lies about who you are with the truth about who you are in Christ. Do not lose heart; Jesus is working in every affliction. He is the answer. Treasure Christ in your trauma because he treasured you in his.

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