

## **Broken Hearts and Wounded Healers**

*Psalm 38:14, Psalm 51:15-17*

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Today I want to explore with you a deep truth. It is proclaimed all through the Bible and even through all world religions and philosophies. The truth is this:

We rarely grow deeply or change dramatically unless we suffer. Often, we cannot significantly help others in their suffering unless we have suffered in a similar way. This is what is called the wounded healer. Because we have been wounded ourselves, we are able to help heal the wounds of others.

When our hearts have been broken they often heal up stronger than ever.

This can sometimes even happen with other parts of our bodies. Drew Brees, the quarterback for the New Orleans Saints, had his throwing arm severely shattered several years ago from a tackle. He wrote a book called *Coming Back Stronger* about his arm and total life-including his spiritual life, rehabilitation. He was fortunate. His arm healed and came back stronger than ever. He is now forty-years old and having perhaps his best season ever.

In Psalm 51 we are warned that the Lord takes no delight in sacrificing and burning animals.

“The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart O God you will not despise.”

It is almost always true that when we do *not* acknowledge or accept our brokenness, our woundedness, our sorrows, our failures, our defeats, we do not grow. We do not learn. And we fail to gain the knowledge we need to help comfort someone else in their pain and sorrow. Psalm 34:18 says, “The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit.”

And the most profound biblical passages on this truth are Isaiah 53:4 & 5. They reach toward the suffering of Jesus on the cross.

“Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases. He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.”

This is a different type of suffering – a very specific universal suffering on behalf of Jesus for the sole purpose of healing us of our sins.

In our case we often can't make much sense of why we are suffering or what purpose it may have. But we are wise to accept it and use that pain to help others. Paul the Apostle speaks of this in his opening lines of his second letter to the Corinthians. The God of consolation consoles us in our affliction so that we may be able to console those who are also afflicted. (This is what I was trying to say to the children in the story I wrote for them.)

Here is another jewel I came across in a novel I am reading – “Misfortune is like fire. It melts everything but gold.”

Suffering has a way of purifying our lives – helping us finally see clearly what is truly important and what is not important. What is gold and what is straw.

We wish we didn't have to suffer to learn those great truths but sadly almost always we do. It seems to be part of our nature to have to learn the hard way. The school of hard knocks and so forth.

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche wrote famously, “That which does not kill us makes us stronger.”

I suppose we can all think of examples where that is *not* the case, but often times it is.

There is even a thing called PTG – Post Traumatic Growth – where people often experience a renewed appreciation for life, a new outlook on life with new and better possibilities for themselves, feeling stronger, tougher, more courage and resilience, more satisfied spiritually and their relationship improve.

Jerry Seinfeld wrote about how his early failures on the stage, being booed and heckled and ignored made him stronger and better. He said, “I don't mind suffering. You suffer in all things – work, relationships, whatever else you do. Unless you are eating ice cream, you are suffering.”

In 1981 when my father was fifty-three years old, he died of melanoma cancer. My mother was only fifty. I was about to turn twenty-five, was in seminary at Princeton and our son Joren was born two-months before he died.

It was all very sudden and horrible. He was fine, then he was very, very ill and in no time he was gone. My father was too sick to ever see his grandson, his first grandchild.

For a few years my mother became a wounded healer. She joined an organization that cared for women whose husbands had died. This was in Atlanta, Georgia. Only once did I get to watch her minister to someone. It seemed to me she knew exactly what to say, what not to say, how to connect widow to widow in a profound helpful healing way. It was a sort of magic and it had a profound impact on me, watching her interact with that grieving woman.

I wish I could tell you that I too became a wounded healer helping other young men who lost their fathers, but I didn't. I can make excuses about being young and distracted with school and marriage and parenthood, but it was an opportunity I failed in. An episode of failure, pure and simple. And maybe now that I have had almost forty years to reflect on this, we can say that all suffering and all tragedies, all sorrows and sins and misfortunes are not going to become growing opportunities.

Perhaps that is too much to expect. Perhaps that is too hard or exhausting. Or perhaps there is a long delay where we learn or grow even decades later. I have many regrets from that time, and I believe those regrets have made me a better pastor. It is an odd sort of courage, but courage nevertheless, to go back and face your regrets and remorse and find something golden hidden in that pile of shame.

My mother did not continue this ministry. She did it for a few years and then other responsibilities arose. She had to move to Florence, Alabama, to take care of her own mother and two aunts who had no children or family. Those were really rough years and very stressful on her. From the stress she developed very bad arthritis in her hands and knees, and after my grandmother and two great aunts died and her long hard caregiving ended, her arthritis got much better, but her fingers remained bent and twisted.

So, we can't and shouldn't romanticize suffering. Sometimes it is just suffering. There is not always growth or insight or coming back stronger.

But I think the Bible and our experiences do proclaim loud and clear that true spiritual depth and maturity does not come, in fact cannot come, without suffering, failure, heartache, disappointment, mistakes, sins, and all the stuff of life that is not marvelous and wonderful and pleasant and heartwarming.

The undeniable fact of life is that if we push our failures and heartaches and suffering aside, if we refuse to acknowledge them and stubbornly deny them or fail to reflect on them, we don't grow, we don't mature or develop. And we are unable to help others who we may be able to comfort or aid in healing.

We become sadly less than fully human and less that God wants us to be.

We can pretend to be invincible, wildly happy and successful and healthy and whole, but ironically our true greatness as human and Christians does not come from going to the best schools and reading the great books and making the best connections, and working hard, and eating healthy food, and exercising, and volunteering to help the less fortunate. Our true greatness as humans, our greatness as disciples of Jesus, comes from moving through our brokenness, our woundedness, our heartaches and mess-ups, and through the grace of God coming back stronger; more honest, more understanding, more courageous, more determined to do the right thing. Amen