

Introduction

I keep a photograph in my office of me picking up my fiancée, Gloria, in my strong, capable arms. A few months later on our honeymoon, we were white-knuckling the handles of a raft in the rapids of Costa Rica. Fast forward a decade and our circumstances were quite different. On our tenth anniversary, a kind stranger offered me his help as he saw Gloria trying her best to lift my disabled body out of an inner tube at a water park. I can only imagine what was going through that gentleman's mind when he saw me struggling to float down the lazy river.

When I was a child, I played tennis and earned two black belts in karate. As a university student, I played pick-up football on my college campus. I never dreamed that I would soon have a physical disability. It's been almost twenty years now since my doctor discovered that the nerves in my arms weren't working properly—firing off chronic pain signals to my brain and twisting themselves into painful neuromas. I've had five surgeries regarding my arms, gone through over a dozen invasive procedures in the hospital, worked for hundreds of hours in therapy, and taken a cocktail of medicines and homeopathic remedies to give me some relief. But nothing has really worked.

I never thought that there would be times when I couldn't lift a cup of water to my lips to take a drink or would need the help of

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my children to get into our minivan. Once I'm in my seat, Gloria is in the driver's seat, she leans over to buckle my seat belt for me. I can count on one hand the number of times I was able to hold my children when they were babies.

On a trip to the United States for a conference, I was eating lunch with a big group of pastors. Without a word, Mack, one of the elders of our church, leaned over and graciously cut my steak for me so I could eat it. Sensing the awkwardness around the table of pastors who were not aware of my disability, he joked, "Don't your elders serve *you* like this?"

Over fifteen years ago, our family moved overseas to plant churches on the Arabian Peninsula. I had surgery a few months prior and was recovering very well. We were hopeful that the pain and disability were now behind us. Then one night while driving in a parking lot as Gloria did some late-night shopping, I felt a sharp burning pain in both of my arms. The problem was back, and it was back with a vengeance. We were so excited about what we had perceived as total healing and were thrilled about plans for the new churches we'd be planting, but instead our hopes went spiraling downward.

The next week a rash of painful bumps covered both of my hands down to my fingertips, and I couldn't bear to touch anything. Depression engulfed me, and I would stay awake most nights pacing back and forth in my bedroom on the verge of losing my mind. In those dark hours of the night Gloria thought I was going crazy and took comfort in the fact that I was not physically able to get out of the house and wander into the desert. We had tried everything, and nothing worked. There was no relief, no joy.

This is how our ministry started in the Middle East. Every weekend Gloria would buckle our baby daughter and me into our seats, and she'd drive us two hours to Dubai to meet people, attend

our partner church, and build contacts for a potential church plant in the center of that city. I would “turn it on” for a few hours, be cordial, cast vision for the church, and then I’d become a shell of myself for the next five days. I was just trying to survive.

And even worse, I had turned into a grumpy, passive-aggressive man. To my great regret, I had completely disengaged from my daughter. I not-so-secretly blamed Gloria for everything. If I was in pain, it was her fault. I didn’t know I was struggling with depression at the time, but I knew something wasn’t right and I wanted to snap out of it—but nothing changed. The darkness simply would not lift. I was disabled, depressed, and angry.

Throughout this trial I felt like the victim and the only one who was suffering. Nobody understood how I felt. The whole world revolved around me and existed to serve me and help me. I started playing the “if only” game. It’s the game where in your mind you say, “If only _____, then I’ll be happy.” For example:

When I’m hungry: If only I had something to eat, then I would have joy.

When people criticize me: If only they would go away, then I would be happy.

If my bank account is empty: If only I had more money, then I could give my kids the life they deserve.

If only my family member hadn’t died . . .

If only I didn’t have this health condition . . .

If only . . . if only . . .

For me, the “if only” game was all about having healthy arms. If only my arms weren’t hurting, then I’d be happy. I said this every day, maybe even every hour, to myself. It became my gospel. John Calvin famously said that our hearts are idol factories, and we are constantly creating different idols to bring us happiness.¹ For me

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it was the idol of comfort that I thought would come only if I had healthy arms and no more pain.

I didn't realize how much my idol pursuit was affecting my wife. I wasn't alone in my distress as I paced the floor those long nights in our bedroom. Gloria was awake too. She was praying for me and was also struggling to hold fast to her hope in God. While I was pacing the floors wondering if I'd ever be able to hold my baby, my wife paced in her own mind wondering if she would ever have a "normal" husband. My idol was the comfort of healthy arms; Gloria's idol was the comfort of a husband with healthy arms. Now, on the other side of that season of depression, I can see clearly that pain and suffering affect not only the one directly experiencing them, but also everyone around that person.

Unfortunately our story is not a unique or isolated tale. I've talked to many families that have been affected by chronic pain, disability, sickness, loss, and depression. A fellow pastor and friend of mine named John also struggles with a disability in both of his hands. He has a hard time typing and doing normal household chores, which leaves his wife to pick up the slack and wait patiently for times when he feels well enough to contribute. John encouraged me to write this book for those caring for the hurting. I am writing out of my experience of being helped in incredible ways by others in my disability. There are much better books on the topic of suffering. However, this is not another book about suffering for the one who suffers. It's a book for everyone who knows people who suffer from pain and loss and wants to see the Rock of Ages underneath their feet. I think it's safe to say that this is a book for all of us.

The aim of chapter 1 is to bring encouragement and healing for you, the caregiver who suffers in silence. Before I can even talk about how to help those who are hurting, you need to first examine

your own heart in the process. You can't pretend that you haven't experienced loss and grief in another's pain. The goal of chapter 2 is to show where your strength in helping the hurting comes from. The remaining chapters will help you practically care for those hurting in your life. There's even an afterword written by my wife, Gloria, where she honestly shares her experience in caring for me in the darkest times.

We all know people who are in pain. We may have a child who struggles with a learning disability, a spouse who is disabled, a friend fighting cancer, a neighbor or fellow church member with chronic pain, an aging parent suffering with any number of illnesses, or those who have lost loved ones.

Maybe you have found yourself asking the following questions:

- How should I, as a church member, respond when a fellow church member is hurting?
- How do I, as a husband or wife, serve and love my spouse who struggles with chronic pain and is distant and emotionally unengaged?
- How should I care for my aging parents in a way that honors both them and God?
- What truth should I speak into the life of a friend who is on his deathbed?
- How do I interact with my cousin who is paralyzed and is living in despair?
- How do I care for a wife who is brokenhearted over a marriage that seems to be falling apart?
- How do I encourage young married couples who are struggling with miscarriages or infertility?

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Maybe you're struggling in your care, and you feel like you can't go on and there is nothing you can do to help the hurting person in your life. You're right, on your own you can't. The goal of this entire book is to point you to Jesus, who is your only hope, and to walk you through some ways you can love those who hurt with the strength God provides.

Grieving Your Loss in Another's Pain

Even though my pain is not the most apparent (I wear no casts or braces), it is relatively easy to spot. I can't use my arms normally, and so I have a loss of physical capabilities. I have to ask for plasticware at restaurants when their forks are too heavy for me to use. I am reminded every day that I'm not strong enough to pick up my children. I ask my children to untie my shoes after I come back from exercising. Though my loss is easy to see, what about the loss my wife has experienced? It's often overlooked, but she's lost much through this trial as well. Unlike most other wives, she doesn't have a husband who can physically help her around the house. I can't take out the trash, move the furniture, pick up a wet towel from the bathroom floor, or make the bed. I remember one day many years ago when she handled a particularly messy potty training accident and joked that it might be the mess that tops all messes. She would know, since she changed virtually every diaper for our four children. My wife not only doesn't have the physical help she needs from me, but she has to spend *additional* time helping me.

She also experiences the emotional and mental anguish that accompanies this type of loss. For example, after leaving the Opryland Hotel in Nashville once after a quick stay, Gloria opened my car door, helped buckle my seat belt, and managed to move the big cart with all of our suitcases to the back of the vehicle. She loaded each bag into the trunk and then closed it up. Three women sitting on a nearby bench had been watching this scene play out. One woman called out to Gloria and told her that it's not right that her "good-for-nothing husband" just sat there and made her do all the work. My gentle and patient wife calmly replied that her husband was disabled, and then she got in the car before any tears arrived. Stuff like this happens all the time. We don't often walk through airport security together because we're tired of getting barked at by officials because I am not helping put the shoes, laptops, bags, and luggage onto the X-ray belt for screening.

You probably have your own scenes you've lived through—scenes where you think that if only people knew what was *really* going on, they might cut you some slack and help you. Anticipating and dealing with this kind of social anxiety can be quite distressing for a caretaker. As you care for and love the sufferer, there's a different kind of suffering that you experience that is often left undressed. If you are caring for someone who's hurting, then the first step you need to take is to honestly grieve the loss that *you* suffer. This first chapter will address how you come to terms with your own loss in someone else's pain.

Grieving Your Loss

If you're helping someone who is hurting, you have given up something to care for them. You have lost something yourself in the process. I lost the health of my arms, but my wife lost a husband with healthy arms. Caregivers face the temptation to believe the lie that their spouse or friend has nothing to contribute. They battle the

exhaustion of constantly defending the ones they care for or worrying about people thinking ill of them. My children also deal with the loss of not having a dad who can do things like pick them up, stop them from tumbling while on their roller skates, or open a box of crackers. They have to learn patience with me, and they can become frustrated when I'm unable to do something that their mom could do for them.

My church staff, who frequently have to stop what they're doing to help me or to give of their personal time to help our family, also experiences loss. For example, Chris has been exceptional at caring for me and my family regarding our physical needs. Whether it's helping to get our car fixed or giving me a ride somewhere, he's always available, and there is a cost for him in my disability. He's happy to help, but it's certainly a different dynamic than having a pastor who is healthy enough to take care of himself and physically help others. You might find yourself in any number of difficult situations.

The one who loses a family member to cancer experiences deep pain and sorrow from the loss. So does the middle-aged teacher who takes repeated trips across the country to care for his aging father who is struggling with Alzheimer's and can hardly remember who his own son is anymore. A young mother spends most of her day trying to fight for joy as she cares for her disabled daughter and her house. A friend doesn't know what to say anymore after igniting the anger of her depressed best friend for the one hundredth time.

My point is that while we are all, by God's grace, privy to extraordinary gifts from his hands through these trials (like learning patience, etc.), we must acknowledge the pain of loss with our eyes wide open. Maybe you've thought that as a Christian you have to smile and pretend to be okay when someone asks you how you are doing. Perhaps you think that if you're grieving, then you're dishonoring God. This isn't so.

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While an incredible preacher in London, Charles Spurgeon often battled depression and massive despair. On one occasion he was out of ministry for six months and had to leave the country. He was so depressed he had difficulty getting out of bed. He said that when depression would come upon him, he felt like a man who was fighting the mist; it was everywhere, and he couldn't hit it.¹

In some ways, our grief as Christians is amplified because our hearts of stone have been made hearts of flesh, and now we hurt for other people differently. You hurt for your family and friends who are suffering. It's imperative that you are honest about the pain that you are going through. Rather than just trying harder and keeping it to yourself, it's important that you grieve your loss and come to terms with your reality.

Jerry Sittser writes,

The pain of loss is unrelenting. It stalks and chases until it catches us. It is as persistent as wind on the prairies, as constant as cold in the Antarctic, as erosive as a spring flood. It will not be denied and there is no escape from it. In the end denial, bargaining, binges, and anger are mere attempts to deflect what will eventually conquer us all. Pain will have its day because loss is undeniably, devastatingly real.²

Because of the realness of loss, the direction of your life has changed. The way you live and rest and work and go about your life is different now.

Grief is work, and sometimes it's very hard work. It can be overwhelming. H. Norman Wright, in his excellent book *Experiencing Grief*, says, "Grief is like the visitor who has overstayed his welcome."³ Grieving is a messy process, and you yearn for it to just go away. You don't know when a sunset or a trip to the pharmacy is going to trigger a memory that crushes your spirit. Sometimes even a moment of quiet will lead your mind to wandering to emotions

you can't control. Grief comes and goes, and there is no way to schedule it in your day planner.

After my pain came back upon our move to the Arabian Peninsula, my friend John and I had a memorable phone conversation. John mentioned the story of King David mourning for thirty days after his child died. We both chuckled at the thought of someone taking thirty days to cry, wail, and mourn their loss publicly. It sounds ridiculous in today's society, but there was probably something very healthy about it. We still suffer today and mourn our losses, but we're often made to feel like we need to choke down our tears and grief instead of dealing with it in healthy and honest ways.

We all grieve and process loss in different ways, but it's essential that you don't stay in denial. You must make it known that it's difficult, that you're struggling. Many professional counselors have said that the single most vital component in healing from pain and loss is having the support of other people. It's important to share with others that you're grieving and going through difficulty. Don't walk this journey alone.

I wonder if this idea of personal grieving is new to you. Perhaps the idea of grieving your loss is uncomfortable and unknown. Maybe you're not sure what's entailed, why you ought to recognize your grief, or where you should start in grieving your loss in someone else's pain. In the rest of this chapter, I'll explain two ways you can do that.

Weeping Honestly

Often in the church Christians are taught that weeping is failing to trust God. There is seldom a place for sorrow and lamentation among Christians—no freedom to cry out to the Lord. However, the book of Psalms is filled with what are called psalms of lament. At

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least two of them show the psalmist crying out to the Lord without even a hint of hope intertwined with his grief.⁴

Psalm 88 is one of these psalms:

O LORD, God of my salvation;
I cry out day and night before you.
Let my prayer come before you;
incline your ear to my cry!
For my soul is full of troubles,
and my life draws near to Sheol.
I am counted among those who go down to the pit;
I am a man who has no strength,
like one set loose among the dead,
like the slain that lie in the grave,
like those whom you remember no more,
for they are cut off from your hand.
You have put me in the depths of the pit,
in the regions dark and deep.
Your wrath lies heavy upon me,
and you overwhelm me with all your waves. *Selah*
You have caused my companions to shun me;
you have made me a horror to them.
I am shut in so that I cannot escape;
my eye grows dim through sorrow.
Every day I call upon you, O LORD;
I spread out my hands to you.
Do you work wonders for the dead?
Do the departed rise up to praise you? *Selah*
Is your steadfast love declared in the grave,
or your faithfulness in Abaddon?
Are your wonders known in the darkness,
or your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?
But I, O LORD, cry to you;
in the morning my prayer comes before you.