

SIGHING ON SUNDAY

40 Meditations for When Church Hurts

MEGAN HILL


P U B L I S H I N G
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Where relevant, Scripture quotations from the New Testament use the ESV's alternate, footnoted translation of *adelphoi* (“brothers and sisters”).

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The LORD is near to the brokenhearted
and saves the crushed in spirit.

(Ps. 34:18)

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INTRODUCTION

We sat in the car for nearly an hour. Outside the windows, we could see people gathering for a picnic in the backyard of a church member, but we didn't open the doors. Instead, I listened while the woman next to me, a member of my church, told me her story of past hurt.

That wasn't the first time I'd heard a church story like hers—of trust broken, friendships lost, and faith shaken—and it was far from the last.

More than forty years ago, I was born into a pastor's family. I napped on the church chairs on Sundays and stayed up late waiting for my dad to come home from long meetings. I'm thankful my parents always communicated to me that life in the church is fundamentally good. But that doesn't mean it's not also hard.

Over my lifetime, I've belonged to a variety of churches. And like anyone who has been in the church for more than a few Sundays, I've been hurt and I've walked with people who have been hurt. The churches I've belonged to have been good churches, churches that loved Christ and proclaimed his gospel. They've also been churches filled with not-yet-glorified saints and under attack from the enemy of God's people.

If you and I could sit together in a car outside a church picnic—watching everyone walk past with their casserole dishes and pitchers of iced tea—we could share our stories. But even without hearing yours (or being able to tell you the details of mine), I can guess the kinds of things we'd talk about.

We'd have stories about hurtful comments and thoughtless actions from other church members. We'd remember times when we were ignored and times when we were deliberately excluded. We'd grieve over pastors and elders who failed to shepherd our souls well. We'd recall friends who are no longer speaking to each other and angry words that can never be unsaid. We'd sigh thinking about ministries that bore little fruit and churches that ultimately shut their doors.

Perhaps we'd even talk about agonizing situations: pastors caught in moral failing, church splits, abuse, slander, financial wrongdoing, crimes committed in the steeple's shadow.

We'd confess to sometimes doubting God himself, questioning if he's really good and wondering if there's any hope for life in his church.

If we sat there for a while—long after the grills were fired up and the children began sneaking brownies from the edges of the platters—we could weep together. And then we could seek a balm for our hurts. We could turn together to the only source of comfort and hope: Jesus Christ as he is revealed in Scripture. And we could begin to apply healing medicine from the hand of that most tender Physician.

This book is born out of my own experiences in the church and out of hearing the experiences of others. But mostly it's born out of the comforts of Scripture. The Word of God alone supplies the unchanging truth and unfailing encouragement that hurting people desperately need, and each of the meditations in this book is designed to apply that precious balm to our wounds.

You'll notice this book is divided into six sections. In the first section ("What Is Happening?"), we'll see seven different kinds of hurt that believers experience in the church. We'll discover that the Bible doesn't ignore the reality of hurt in the covenant community; in fact, Scripture testifies that believers throughout history have experienced it. Next, we'll ask the question "Why Is Church So Hard?" and answer it by looking at some big truths about why

Introduction

hurt happens. Then we'll consider "Why Should I Trust God When Church Hurts?" and see how the character of our God can lead us to trust him in the midst of trials. The fourth section, "What Can I Do?," examines godly responses that we should have when we are hurt and warns against some common tactics of Satan that would draw us into deeper misery. Fifth, we'll turn our attention to Christ's relationship to the church and ask "Why Should I Keep Showing Up?" Finally, we'll consider the answer to the question, "What Have Others Done in My Situation?" and see how the people from the first section were able to flourish even after hurt.

Although it may feel right now like what you need is a quick solution, I'd encourage you to read this book from beginning to end, taking as much time as you need between meditations. To rightly understand hard situations, we need the whole scope of the Bible's testimony about things like sin's pervasiveness, God's character, and the church's value—even when those truths don't seem to fix our problems immediately. The God who made us and takes care of us has provided encouragements for us throughout his Word, and I don't want you to miss any of them.

This is a book you can read on your own, of course, but you may want to read it with a friend or a group of friends. Each meditation includes reflection questions that could facilitate discussion. As we noted earlier, most Christians who have spent time in the church have a story of hurt, and we can help one another best when we are all supplied with the Bible's healing balm.

I may not know the specifics of your hard church story, but I do know where to get help. Come and see.

WHAT IS HAPPENING?

I'm sorry you've had to pick up this book. If you're reading this, it's probably because your church is a hard place for you right now. Whatever the specific circumstance, I'm sure you're doing a lot of sighing, and maybe even weeping, on Sundays. An experience that's meant to be joyful—worshipping with the body of Christ—is now sad and difficult. And it has implications for every day of the week as you try to navigate damaged relationships and disappointed expectations. I'm sorry.

In these first seven meditations, we're going to answer the question "What Is Happening?" We'll consider seven types of hurt that happen in the church, and to do that, we'll look at seven different people (or groups of people) from Scripture who experienced hurt in the community of believers. Some of them are from the Old Testament, where God gathered his covenant people as the nation of Israel. Some of them are from the New Testament, where God gathered his covenant people as the church. All of them have been in a hard situation like the one where you are now.

As you read each meditation, I simply want you to notice that God does not ignore hurt in the church. In fact, he tenderly records each of these people's sorrows in his Word. I also want you to take comfort from the fact that you are not alone. The hard things that are happening to you have happened to God's people before you, and just as God was faithful to them, he will be faithful to you.



DAY 1

I'M BEING NEGLECTED

*At my first defense no one came to stand by me,
but all deserted me. (2 Tim. 4:16)*

The man shuffles toward the Roman magistrate in chains. This will be a hard day. He's innocent, but the political system is out for him, and he doubts he'll get a fair trial. He needs to defend himself, but he knows his critics are preparing their accusations. *Maybe*, he thinks, *someone is here to support me*. He scans the crowd, looking for a familiar face—another Christian with an encouraging smile or an outstretched hand. The members of the church knew he'd have his hearing today. They also knew how much he valued their relationship. He'd pastored and prayed for them for years; many of them came to faith because of his ministry. But as the man reaches the front, he realizes he will have to do this alone. Not a single church member showed up.

Today's verse may be the saddest sentence in all of Paul's writings. At the end of a long ministry to which he had dedicated his life, Paul sat in prison for the sake of Christ and because of his relationship to the church. Called to defend himself, though, he appeared alone.

It's painful to witness the depths of Paul's sadness here. "No one" came with him. "All" abandoned him. And the Christians in Rome didn't simply forget—that would be hurtful enough—but they deliberately chose not to accompany Paul; they "deserted" him. Like the disciples who fled on the night of Jesus's crucifixion, the members of the church looked out for themselves and decided not to look out for Paul.

Perhaps that's been your experience too. Maybe church members don't notice the hard time you are going through, maybe they haven't

I'm Being Neglected

prayed for you or checked on you, or maybe nobody recognizes your gifts or welcomes you into the life of the church. Maybe you've been serving and everyone takes it for granted, or maybe you've been struggling and the congregation gave up helping when your troubles began to drag on.

Dear Christian, this is hard. You may feel entirely ignored, but please know you are not. The Lord saw Paul, and he sees you: "No one came to stand by me," Paul wrote, ". . . but the Lord stood by me" (2 Tim. 4:16, 17).

Read. Read Acts 6:1–7 and Galatians 2:11–14. Who is being neglected in each of these accounts? What were the reasons for the neglect? What was the resolution? How could it help you to know that neglect in the church is not new and that neglect has various causes? How does it encourage you to know that God addresses neglect?

Reflect. A Lifeway Research study reported that people's reasons for leaving church are often related to neglect. Respondents said "church members . . . 'were judgmental of others' (17 percent) [and] 'the church was run by a clique that discouraged involvement' (12 percent)." Additionally, when the respondents stopped going to church, "Sixteen percent said 'nobody contacted me after I left' and another 16 percent said 'nobody seemed to care that I left.'" Why do you think being neglected in the church is so hurtful?

Pray. Tell the Lord about a time when you've been neglected in the church. Ask him to draw near to you as the God who cares for the weak and rescues the one who "has no helper" (Ps. 72:12). Thank him for having his eyes toward you and his ears toward your cry (Ps. 34:15).



DAY 2

I'M BEING SINNED AGAINST

*For it is not an enemy who taunts me. . . . But it is you,
a man, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend.
We used to take sweet counsel together; within God's
house we walked in the throng. (Ps. 55:12–14)*

David was in a hard place. He was restless, he moaned, he trembled, he prayed. His days held anguish, terror, and horror. He wanted to run away. But, unlike difficult situations David describes in other psalms, this was different. This time, David's oppressor wasn't a pagan army coming against him from the outside. His oppressor was his friend. And not just any friend—a close friend, a friend who regularly worshipped with him in God's house.

The companion who used to go up to the temple with David didn't even come against him with fist or voice raised. That, at least, would have been obvious to everyone. Instead, David's friend set out to destroy him with sneaky words. He spoke his lies smoothly and softly—no one would have known what he was up to—but “war was in his heart” (v. 21).

His betrayal was so hurtful that David says he'd rather face an army. It's hard to be taunted by an enemy, but it's what David expected, so it was bearable. It's not easy to hear insults from an adversary, but at least David had the option to walk away (v. 12). But when it's a fellow-worshipper who sins against you? David says that's when he was completely overwhelmed.

Maybe you too have been deliberately sinned against by someone in your congregation. Maybe you've experienced unkindness, gossip, partiality, and slander. Maybe you've even been the victim of bullying or abuse. Maybe you can say, as David did in another psalm, “Even

my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me” (Ps. 41:9).

This hurts—perhaps more than being openly attacked by unbelievers—because our fellow church members profess to be changed by Christ and believe his gospel. When they sin against us, their speech may sound graceful, but their actions violate their covenant with God and his people (Ps. 55:20).

In response to his troubles, David’s instinct was to “wander far away” and to “lodge in the wilderness” (v. 7). Joining “the throng” (v. 14) in God’s house is often the last thing you want to do when it’s a place where you’ve been mistreated like David was. The wilderness may be harsh and lonely, you think, but at least nobody can hurt you there.

But David found two comforts in his distress: the Lord’s tender care for his people (v. 22) and the Lord’s certain justice for wrongdoers (v. 23). Dear Christian, the Lord looks on you with love and will deal with every sin committed against you. Either those sins were laid on Christ and paid for at the cross, or they will be judged by God on the last day. Your hurt has not been forgotten.

Read. Read 2 Samuel 16:5–14. List the ways Shimei sinned against David; if you can, use biblical terms for those sins. What was Abishai’s instinct? Can you relate? List the reasons David gives for overlooking Shimei’s attack. Can you apply any of those reasons to your own situation? Did ignoring Shimei seem to resolve the situation (see vv. 13–14)? How does the frankness of this story encourage you in your experience of hurt?

Reflect. Do you agree with David’s assessment that it’s easier to be hurt by a known enemy than to be hurt by a friend and fellow believer? Why is hurt from a Christian friend so damaging?

Pray. Tell the Lord about the sins committed against you. If you can, use biblical terms for those sins. Using the words of Psalm 55, ask God to sustain you (v. 18) and to give you justice (v. 19). Ask him to help you trust him (v. 23).



DAY 3

I'M ENDURING DIFFICULT PERSONAL CIRCUMSTANCES

And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. (Luke 2:36–37)

The old woman hobbled across the temple courtyard, a singular figure in a crowd of families. She was a prophetess from the tribe of Asher—one of the so-called “lost tribes” of Israel’s northern kingdom that had rebelled with Jeroboam and then been conquered by Assyria and sent into exile (1 Kings 12:16–21). Her ancestors had been so scattered that most people believed the family line extinct. What’s more, the woman had no immediate family. Her husband had died long ago, and, if she had children, they weren’t around. She was also “advanced in years.” She had witnessed the siege of her city and the conquest of the Romans; now, her body was deteriorating and the grave waited. And if all this weren’t hard enough, she was financially vulnerable—an elderly widow in a society without safety nets, dependent on others’ generosity to provide for her needs.

Today’s verse paints a picture of a woman who came to worship bearing the weight of personal hardship. Anna sang psalms, listened to Scripture, and offered prayers alongside people who had social connections, spouses, children, money, and the vigor of youth. But Anna had none of those. Over her lifetime, Anna had accumulated many reasons to feel out of place in the congregation.

The crowds in the temple may have been oblivious to Anna's difficulties, but the Bible doesn't hurry past her losses. The Lord gives tender attention to the personal circumstances that made it hard for Anna to show up to worship, day after day, for decades.

Maybe you can relate to Anna. Sometimes church hurts not because of the church, but because circumstances in our lives increase the difficulty of being with God's people. An unbelieving spouse or unwanted singleness can provoke grief—especially when we see happy families in other pews. Illness or disability can make participating in worship difficult. Financial difficulties or job loss can convince us we don't belong with people who seem to have their lives together.

Anna spent decades going to worship alone, with a failing body, lacking financial security. The Lord knew this, and he graciously placed her in the right place at the right time to welcome the Messiah (v. 38). In answer to her prayers of many years, the Lord allowed her to see Jesus.

Dear Christian, be encouraged. If Christ met Anna in her hardship, he will meet you in yours.

Read. Read Luke 8:42–48. What was the woman's situation? What do you think her decision to approach Jesus from behind (v. 44) and to remain hidden (v. 47) tells us about how she was feeling? If neither the disciples nor the people in the crowd noticed her (v. 45), what does that tell us about her relationship to Jesus's followers? How does Jesus respond to her? How can this story encourage you when you come burdened to church?

Reflect. How do personal trials make it difficult to come to worship? Why is it often hard to be around people who have blessings that we do not?

Pray. Tell the Lord about your circumstances. Ask him to help you in your troubles (Ps. 46:1). Thank him for promising to be "near to the brokenhearted and [to save] the crushed in spirit" (Ps. 34:18).