

A dandelion seed head is the central focus, with its seeds and stem extending across the frame. The seeds are covered in numerous clear water droplets of various sizes, some of which are in sharp focus. The background is a soft, light blue with a subtle pattern of larger, out-of-focus water droplets. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

Preaching
to
PEOPLE
IN PAIN

How Suffering Can Shape Your Sermons
and Connect with Your Congregation

Matthew D. Kim

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Introduction

Imagine that you have the following choice to make for your listeners. This decision will have an impact on your congregants' church experience for the rest of their lives: (1) They can listen to sermons that only address the topic of success in the Christian life, or (2) they can listen to sermons that only discuss the issue of pain and suffering. Which type of sermon do you think *they* would prefer? Which message would *you* rather preach?

While this hypothetical situation is extreme, my guess is that most North American Christians would choose the former: sermons on success. Why? The overarching metanarrative in North America is one of triumphalism and victory.¹ We tend to celebrate individualism, success, and other virtues that support upward mobility, progress, and advancement. Many North American congregations champion these sanguine values as well—and I am not just talking about proponents of the prosperity gospel. Do we frequently raise the homiletical banner of success but seldom preach sermons about suffering? Why are we so allergic to suffering?

Another question: Might sermons about suffering and pain resonate with you and your listeners more deeply than the narrative of success and progress? In the Gospels, Jesus speaks more about suffering than about success. Perhaps he knew something about the human condition that we do not. This book provides an important corrective to the American Dream story line, which permeates many Christian churches today. In this book,

1. See Mark Charles and Soong-Chan Rah, *Unsettling Truths: The Ongoing, Dehumanizing Legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2019), 8.

I encourage pastors to preach less pain-free sermons and to preach more pain-full sermons where preachers disclose their own suffering and pain, which allows space to encourage listeners to identify and share their suffering in Christian community for the ultimate purpose of healing and transformation.

Over the last several years, I have experienced various types of pain and suffering. Scattered throughout this book, I share those specific hardships in greater detail. You have your own stories to tell, and I hope that you'll find the freedom to write to me and share your pain with me.² In addition, I have preached about success and about suffering many times. Here is what I have learned about the differences between them: suffering is ubiquitous; success is not. Everyone experiences some form of suffering. Not everyone gets to experience accomplishment. Suffering brings people together. Success can separate the closest of friends.

I have divided this book into two parts. In part 1, I invite you into an open and honest conversation about the ways that pastors and parishioners suffer and experience pain, and I articulate a process for preaching on this pain.

In chapter 1, one of my goals is to persuade you that preaching on pain and suffering is vital for your personal well-being as well as for the congregation's potential for life transformation. While it seems counterintuitive to preach regularly on suffering, sharing our pain with the congregation from the pulpit may be the very vehicle that drives congregational change. The chapter addresses various types of pain for pastors/preachers and offers a road map for discovering and wisely disclosing pains in the pastor's life.

In chapter 2, we explore the numerous types of pains and suffering that listeners embody every single day and bring with them into the worship service. If we are honest, we preachers witness discouragement on the countenances of our listeners. As a pastor, I was often perplexed by my listeners' perceived apathy and despondency toward the Christian faith. "Why is their Christian life so depleted of spiritual vitality?" I would think to myself as I poured out sermon energies each Sunday. However, when I understood my listeners' experiences and suffering, I began to have more grace for them. This second chapter names the sufferings and pains

2. I invite you to share your stories with me at matthewdkim@gmail.com.

of our listeners—and when appropriate, I include examples from other ethnicities and cultures.

Chapter 3 offers a plan for preaching on pain. I suggest nine foundational questions for exegeting pain in Scripture and in the congregation. These questions serve as prework before we preach on suffering and double as a working blueprint for the major chapters in the latter half of the book. I also suggest some general principles and reminders for preaching on the topic of pain.

In part 2, we will explore six different types of pain that listeners commonly harbor in their souls. First, chapter 4 identifies painful decisions. Every listener comes to church with a “past,” which is occasionally checked. Albert Camus, the French philosopher and author, once said, “Life is a sum of all your choices.” Sometimes the decisions we made in the past are painful and linger on as the bane of our existence. We cannot seem to move past these backdated mistakes and sins. They resurface at the most inopportune moments—usually when we are on the brink of a spiritual breakthrough. This chapter identifies some of the painful decisions our listeners have made, considers how we can show them God’s grace in spite of their poor choices, and provides suggestions for helping them in the sermon to move toward healing and transformation.

In chapter 5, we name some pains wrought by ill-advised and unintentional financial decisions. Money is one of the most difficult topics to preach on. Pastors know that tension all too well. The state of our listeners’ finances often seems to be a taboo topic. Yet, what if we preach messages that encourage godly stewardship in light of unwise or unavoidable financial choices? That will be the subject of this chapter on painful finances.

Painful health issues are the subject of chapter 6, where we discuss matters related to our physical and mental health. We are living in an age of grave health concerns. Close to 40 percent of Americans will be diagnosed with cancer at some time in their life.³ Millions of Americans live with chronic pain and medical conditions such as ALS, diabetes, osteoporosis, vertigo, nerve pain, fibromyalgia, arthritis, glaucoma, and much more. Mental health is also an explosive area that the church needs to be more intentional about addressing even from the pulpit. Suicide continues to curtail lives at every stage of life. Myriad health issues plague the members

3. “Cancer Stat Facts: Cancer of Any Site,” National Cancer Institute, accessed June 25, 2020, <https://seer.cancer.gov/statfacts/html/all.html>.

of our churches. They are lamenting: “Why me, God?” How can we encourage Christians amid physical and mental hardships as well as care for others who experience such challenges?

In chapter 7, we recognize that listeners live with losses of all kinds: death of grandparents, parents, a spouse, children, siblings, relatives; loss of jobs; loss of promotions; loss of retirement savings; loss of homes; loss of respect and status; loss of marriage; loss of pregnancy; infertility; and much more. How can we bring the hope of the gospel into such experiences and feelings of loss? The chapter addresses various forms of loss and demonstrates how to preach with greater empathy and hope.

With regard to painful relationships, chapter 8 reminds us that God created us as social beings to be in relationship with one another. The trouble is that not all relationships flourish. We suffer because of fragile and fractured relationships with parents, a spouse, our children, friends, neighbors, bosses and coworkers, church members, and others. Our relationships with others are divided on a number of different levels, including race, gender, ethnicity, culture, politics, denominations, socioeconomics, beliefs, interests, hobbies, and more. The chapter names and articulates ways forward in addressing painful relationships.

Last, in chapter 9, we look at the power of the sin that holds us captive. Satan eagerly seeks opportunities to discourage Christians about past and current struggles with sin. Listeners vacillate between victories over and relapse into particular sinful behaviors. These sins are a confounding source of pain and shame. How can we address sin in sermons and even share some personal struggles with the congregation as well? The chapter helps pastors see the value in lovingly naming personal and corporate sins and recommends ways to overcome them by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Yet this book seeks not to dwell in the land of theory alone. I want to show us that preaching on pain and suffering is very much an expression and outworking of lived theology. In each chapter, I share stories, draw from the experiences of others, identify relevant Scripture texts that impart biblical wisdom, and offer best practices. At the conclusion of each chapter, I provide discussion questions and a sample sermon that integrates some of the practical suggestions in the main chapters. In the appendix, a worksheet is available for exploring personal pain as well as corporate suffering in our congregations.

We need not preach on only success or only suffering. Preaching on success, at times, is necessary. But so is preaching on suffering and pain. I hope that after reading this book you will agree with me that speaking on suffering regularly, and as your preaching pericope warrants, will contribute to increased vulnerability and congregational change. “Preaching on pain” sounds like an oxymoron, but it is not. It’s actually the soothing balm that brings healing and life to weary souls who may identify more with suffering than with success. Let’s begin the journey toward suffering successfully.



PART 1

Naming
THE PAIN

1

The Preacher's Pain

In nearly ten years of serving in pastoral ministry as a youth pastor, college pastor, and senior pastor, I can count on one hand the number of times that a church member asked me how I was doing and actually cared enough to listen to my pain and suffering. Why has this lack of care for pastors become so normative in our society? The minister, as perceived by the average churchgoer, is the person who does the work of ministry, but rarely does he or she need a form of “listening ministry”¹ from others. Yet pastors are human too. As Chuck DeGroat observes, “Lost pastors can make it a long way on the fuel of the false self. They may be successful, influential, endearing, charming, and smart. But beneath the veneer are people deeply afraid, lost and lonely, powder kegs of unmet and neglected needs. They have stories that have never been explored, pain never acknowledged, violations of others unconfessed.”²

In the seminary context, I have seen similar one-directional exchanges occur between students and me, also leading me toward the conclusion that opportunities are few and far between for Christian leaders like pastors, professors, teachers, counselors, and others to disclose their spiritual,

1. See Susan K. Hedahl, *Listening Ministry: Rethinking Pastoral Leadership* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002); and Lynne M. Baab, *The Power of Listening: Building Skills for Mission and Ministry* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

2. Chuck DeGroat, “Pastor, Why Are You Hiding?,” *Christianity Today*, January 15, 2019, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2019/january-web-exclusives/pastor-why-are-you-hiding.html>.

physical, relational, emotional, economic, and other ontological selves. Perhaps you have encountered comparable indifference from your congregants or students. They assume that—while you are not always perched on a spiritual mountaintop—you are doing just fine in your soul. The truth is that perhaps the most sequestered person—struggling the most at any given time within a congregation—is the pastor himself or herself. Yet, is your prolonged silence eating at your very existence?

Isn't it refreshing to be able to admit aloud, "I am human too," or to be able to say freely, "My pastor is human too"? Depending on your church culture or ethnic culture, divulging one's pain and suffering as a minister of the gospel may be simply taboo. However, suffering and pain are no respecters of persons. Some of the most horrifically painful stories I have heard are from pastors who have undergone or are presently experiencing immense suffering.

In preparing to write this book, I surveyed several church pastors about preaching on pain and suffering. One pastor battled a brain tumor and experienced a form of chronic pain resembling "cluster" headaches for over a decade—one of the worst pains known to humanity other than childbirth. Yet a different pastor is haunted by the hollowing effect of his parents' divorcing and remarrying, each more than once. Another pastor struggles to make sense of the heinousness of systemic racism and how the gospel challenges our sinfulness. One pastor laments the daily grind of having a child who suffers from a genetic disorder that has required numerous surgeries. Another pastor tries to make sense of birthing a child with Down syndrome later in life. One pastor shares about his wife having numerous miscarriages. Another pastor expresses the agony of internalizing the collective suffering of his congregants. One pastor that I know of lost his wife and children in a horrific car accident. Stories of suffering endured by pastors are endless. Pastors are not immune from encountering unspeakable tragedy and hardship. If we believe in the power of the local church, why, then, are we so reluctant to share struggles with our beloved Christian communities?

Part of the pastor's dilemma is how our culture reacts to the suffering of others. People frankly don't want to hear about it. Consider how we, at least in North America, commonly greet others. We ask a person, "How are you?," but it's merely a courtesy acknowledgment of their existence, just in question form. We expect the other person to respond with some

trite retort such as “Good” or “Can’t complain.” In other words, we don’t *really* want to know how the other is *really* doing. Admit it. Suffering is often painful, raw, shocking, gut-wrenching, lonely, maddening, exposing, annoying, confusing, and even volatile. The pain of others exacerbates these and other feelings of being downtrodden.

At the same time, not all suffering is identical. The mystery of pain is that no two people experience pain identically even in the midst of very similar trials. Pain is also polarizing and perplexing. There are generally two converse attitudes toward suffering. Either people love to tell others of (i.e., vent and revel in) their misery and feel entitled to complain or grumble incessantly as if they are the only ones on the planet going through the hells of life, or people may try to conceal it from others because they feel ashamed or don’t want to be judged. It’s no wonder why pastors often err on the side of silence.

Moreover, Christians often minimize suffering by putting on a happy face upon entering the sanctuary and fellowship hall on Sunday morning. Such is the existence of the average pastor. We may feel like being transparent about our hardships, but then we wonder if such vulnerability may somehow undermine our leadership or pastoral authority. We might plow ahead by telling ourselves, “There is no time for wallowing in my agony when there is gospel work to be done.” But as theologian Kelly Kopic points out in his book *Embodied Hope*, “We can acknowledge the struggle of being a follower of Yahweh, the creator of heaven and earth, and having to deal with suffering as it is: real, tragic, and heartbreaking.”³ In many ways, suffering is the great equalizer. At some point, every human being suffers and experiences pain—both Christians and non-Christians alike. Pastors and preachers are no exception. We cannot allow ourselves to stand “above the congregation” as if we are better than they. We can admit and share our pain and suffering with judiciousness.

Since pain is ubiquitous, the pulpit can be a place to address the topic strategically with biblical, theological sophistication as well as with cultural sympathy and empathy.⁴ But merely mentioning the pain while offer-

3. Kelly M. Kopic, *Embodied Hope: A Theological Meditation on Pain and Suffering* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2017), 17.

4. The sheer volume of books on pain and suffering is quite astounding. It seems like every Christian writer wants to share their particular take on the topic. Over the last six decades, for example, the deluge of ink spilled on suffering has amassed inspiring works such as C. S. Lewis’s *The Problem of Pain*, R. C. Sproul’s *Surprised by Suffering*, Randy Alcorn’s *If God Is*

ing a few flavorful biblical tonics is not the end or the catchall solution. We pastors and preachers must make ourselves available to our people postsermon. It's not prudent to preach on pain from Scripture, dumping our demons on our listeners, and then run off to the fellowship hall for refreshments. We must walk with our people in their pain, through their pain, and after their pain, and even in moments when hopelessness resurfaces and they relapse into their pain. More about that later in chapter 2.

This opening chapter addresses various pains in your life as a pastor and offers a road map for discovering and disclosing those pains from the pulpit and as a member of congregational life. Let's pause briefly to entertain insights that Scripture offers about pain and suffering.

Scriptural Snapshots on Pain and Suffering

Pain and suffering enter Scripture's purview immediately after the fall in Genesis 3. Postfall, there is no reentry into God's perfect Eden. Adam and Eve are banished forever, never to return to the garden. Strangely, as Christians, however, we can temporarily forget that we live in a fallen, sinful, and broken world. We live today as if we deserve readmittance into an amusement theme park called "Utopic Universe"—that is, the prefallen state of the garden of Eden (Gen. 1 and 2).

God has, no doubt, been extremely patient with humanity. He is not surprised by our suffering, nor does he tune us out when we sinfully murmur and grumble against him. God is here among us and present in our suffering and pain. He is not distant even though it can feel like it. The Bible includes more verses about suffering than about joy, which tells of the somber reality of the Christian life in a postfall world. Turning the pages of Scripture, we read sporadically about existential enjoyment and the pursuit of pleasure—yes, God created us to enjoy his creation—and yet, more verses speak directly to suffering and pain in the Old and New Testaments. The portrait of discipleship brushed on the canvas of life by

Good, John Piper's *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*, Timothy Keller's *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, Philip Yancey's *Where Is God When It Hurts?*, Elisabeth Elliot's *A Path through Suffering*, J. Todd Billings's *Rejoicing in Lament*, Joni Eareckson Tada's *A Place of Healing*, Gerald Sittser's *A Grace Disguised*, J. I. Packer's *A Grief Sanctified*, Soong-Chan Rah's *Prophetic Lament*, Sheila Wise Rowe's *Healing Racial Trauma*, and many others.

the very words of our Savior (such as in John 16:33) only reinforces our sense of a Christian life brimming with sweat and struggle.

The passages of Scripture on pain and suffering are copious indeed. Job might be one of the most referenced books of the Bible associated with pain and suffering, but Scripture is replete with countless characters who suffered in both great and small ways. In the Old Testament, Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Samson's mother, Hannah, and Michal (King David's first wife), and Elizabeth (the cousin of Mary and eventual mother of John the Baptist) in the New Testament were tortured by their barrenness or infertility. Some scholars have suggested that over 40 percent of the Psalms are songs of lament.⁵ For example, King David is baffled by God's tolerance of his enemies. His imprecatory psalms throw down visceral, violent words against his foes. The Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah's impending suffering. Later in the Gospels, Jesus shares regularly about his suffering and pain. Paul writes extensively in portions of his letters about his suffering—for example, in 2 Corinthians. Jesus also foretells that his disciples will not escape suffering. At times, he sounds as if suffering was a prerequisite or precondition for any bona fide disciple. Many characters in Scripture encounter various forms of pain and suffering in their lifetime. The narratives of broken, pain-filled personalities are littered throughout the Gospels. Why, then, are we so astounded by suffering?

A Prosperity Gospel or a Pain-Full Gospel?

Perhaps, if we can be transparent, the problem with Christianity is not suffering and pain in and of themselves. Yes, it is perfectly acceptable and normal to mourn and lament. God expects to hear the cries of his children. At the same time, the tension is that we are also invited to embrace Christ's call to discipleship—to pick up our cross daily (with every Christian receiving a different form of the cross)! The gospel is a gospel that is saturated, steeped, in pain. Jesus's sacrificial death, burial, and resurrection remind us that the Christian is called to a daily death. As Jesus says plainly, suffering is normative rather than the exception to the rule for those who dare call themselves Christians, or “little Christs.” He says, “Whoever wants to be

5. See Glenn Pemberton, *Hurting with God: Learning to Lament with the Psalms* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2012), 37, cited by Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 22.

my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Matt. 16:24). Moreover, Paul declares, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live” (Gal. 2:20). The command to die daily is not simply for Jesus and Paul. It’s a call for modern Christians as well. What if we, as Christ followers, were able to view and experience suffering differently from those who live without hope?

We, in the twenty-first century, internalize a love/hate relationship with the prosperity gospel. We surreptitiously covet what it claims but hate what it stands for (i.e., what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace”⁶). Our sinful nature craves comfort and the finer things of life. Nobody wants to be introduced to “Lady Suffering” personified. To God’s chagrin, his children look more comfortable at times than the people who have yet to call him “Lord, Lord.” Paul Borthwick and Dave Ripper helpfully point out in *The Fellowship of the Suffering*, “Scripture is emphatic: suffering, in all its forms, is an unequivocal, inescapable part of not only the fallen human condition but the Christian life.”⁷

Next time you are at a social gathering, try greeting someone with “How are you *suffering* today?” instead of the proverbial “How are you *doing* today?” The person, now in utter shock or sheer confusion, will probably not know how to respond. They’ll think they misheard you. Our culture is so pain-averse and pain-sensitive that any modicum of pain and suffering can render Christians helpless and hopeless. Simply put, we have forgotten that there is a God who is sovereign and who knows what he is doing. He is a God who permits pain. We, human beings, have a tough time making sense of this mystery.

While there is no reason to actively run toward pain and suffering, the difference for the Christian is in how we respond to our plight. How are Christians any different from those without hope? What if Christians walked or limped in stride with suffering, albeit gingerly at times, rather than allowing it to deter us and even cause us to lose our faith? What would it look like for disciples—the New Testament’s Greek word for “disciples” literally means “learners”—to learn what it means to imitate Christ and participate in Christ’s suffering, in all its varied forms?

6. See, e.g., Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 44–46.

7. Paul Borthwick and Dave Ripper, *The Fellowship of the Suffering: How Hardship Shapes Us for Ministry and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2018), 14.

Why Share Our Suffering?

Scripture exposes suffering and pain because God provides solutions for us and *is* the solution for the Christian. Jesus and Paul regularly shared their suffering so that we could share ours as well. The verb *to share* has two meanings in this book. First, we are talking about sharing or communicating with others regarding our pain and suffering. Second, *sharing* means participating in, feeling, and experiencing the turmoil of others and encouraging them and empathizing with them in the midst of it. Paul says to the Philippian believers, “I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead” (Phil. 3:10–11).

As fellow journeymen and journeywomen, preachers have freedom to participate in the sufferings of Christ and the sufferings that reflect our humanness in a sinful world. J. Howard Olds writes, “To live is to struggle, to endure suffering, to come to grips with pain. Pastors are not immune from the common sufferings of humanity. We get sick physically, struggle emotionally, feel the strains of relationships, and work like everyone else to make ends meet. What others don’t have to deal with is preaching the good news in the midst of personal pain.”⁸ Should pastors, then, preach on pain and suffering regularly, or even ever?

Pitfalls of Preaching on Pain

Let’s begin with some reasons why we avoid preaching on pain. If you have a market-driven philosophy of ministry, preaching on pain is an evangelistic turnoff. Nobody wants to be reminded of their present difficult circumstances on Sunday morning—especially on their Sabbath or day off. You can imagine your congregant inviting her coworker on Monday morning: “Hey Lisa, would you like to come to church with me for the next six weeks and hear this fantastic sermon series on suffering?”

Daniel T. Hans raises a number of valid questions regarding preachers sharing their pain from the pulpit. He asks, “Does a preacher have the right to carry his or her own confusion and pain into the pulpit? Doesn’t such

8. J. Howard Olds, “Preaching out of Pain,” *Ministry Matters*, August 1, 2008, <https://www.ministrymatters.com/preach/entry/68/preaching-out-of-pain>.

transparency focus more upon the preacher than the Lord? Does not personal exposure in preaching turn the pulpit into a soap opera and denigrate the ministry of proclamation into self-aggrandizement?”⁹ He continues by asking, “Shouldn’t a human preacher be human in preaching?”¹⁰ Admittedly, inviting people into our pain and practicing self-disclosure may generate unintended consequences. Let’s quickly name four arguments against preachers’ self-disclosure.

Self-Disclosure Damages Listeners’ Faith in God

Depending on what struggles we share, some listeners out there may falter in their faith in God as a result of hearing about our troubles. We don’t want to be the “millstone” around other believers’ necks, which Jesus so vividly describes in the Gospels. While we know that pastors are human, most Christians want to believe that their pastor is somehow closer to Christ—not falling into the same discipleship snares that they do. Whether we like it or not, pastors are Christlike figures in their parishioners’ eyes. A pastor who shares freely about his or her struggles may elicit an unwanted response from listeners and diminish their faith in God. They may even feel manipulated by the preacher who shares emotional pain in transactional form to get something from the listener in response. The naysayers and ecclesiological pundits would argue that pastors should never encourage or promote doubt among their listeners. What benefit is there to causing gratuitous suspicion in one’s congregation about who God is and how he responds to or permits human suffering?

Self-Disclosure Diminishes Pastoral Authority

Second, some listeners may doubt our pastoral authority as ministers of the gospel and taper the trust we have with them. Again, Olds continues, “Preaching should not be a therapy session for the preacher. Congregations want their pastors to be real, but they are not interested in being dragged through all the painful details of our personal struggles.”¹¹ If we are living an immoral life or participating in sinful practices that jeopardize

9. Daniel T. Hans, “Preaching through Personal Pain: What Can You Say When the Tragedy Is Yours?,” *Leadership Journal* 10, no. 1 (Winter 1989): 35–39.

10. Hans, “Preaching through Personal Pain.”

11. Olds, “Preaching out of Pain.”

our pastoral calling, then we need to confess this to our church board and perhaps even leave the ministry (at least for a season or maybe permanently). In addition, the pulpit is not the appropriate setting to share certain struggles. Rather, a more fitting venue may be at a pastor's small group or with trusted friends.

Self-Disclosure Focuses the Sermon Too Much on the Preacher

Third, Haddon Robinson warns about the dangers of self-therapy preaching: "First, we can end up using the pulpit for self-therapy. One's style of preaching can change during a crisis. Often, along the way, a suffering pastor preaches a sermon that is nine-tenths his painful story and one-tenth Bible. . . . Preaching becomes a catharsis for his pain. . . . [The congregation is] not unsympathetic, but after a while the weekly service becomes an emotional downer. People don't follow for long leaders who can't handle their emotions."¹² Here, a couple of unintended consequences may be that the congregants believe you are one-upping them in "suffering comparison" when you unintentionally communicate that your problems are worse than theirs or that you are so consumed by your personal concerns that you cannot handle the congregation's struggles.¹³

Self-Disclosure Makes for Repetitive Sermons

Everyone can tolerate a gut-wrenching story once or twice, but after a while the recounting of it will tire the listener. I know a pastor who lost his daughter to cancer thirty years ago. My heart, of course, cries out for him and his unspeakable loss. In every sermon I have heard him preach (several times), he weaves into the message this incredible gut punch in his life. The premature death of his daughter is a woeful tragedy that no one should have to endure, but the pulpit is not the place to tell her story over and over again. The story of loss, while prominent in one's consciousness, eventually begins to lose its impact because of the sheer repetition. The listener inevitably becomes numb to the preacher's pain. Self-disclosure,

12. Haddon Robinson, "When You're in Pain," *Christianity Today*, May 19, 2004, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/leadership-books/voiceinwilderness/mmpp03-8.html>.

13. From a survey respondent who pointed me to the work of Carol Kent, who argues this. See, e.g., Carol Kent, *When I Lay My Isaac Down: Unshakable Faith in Unthinkable Circumstances*, updated and expanded ed. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2013).

when done inappropriately or laboriously, can be detrimental to one's preaching ministry. However, what are some possible benefits of sharing about your life from the pulpit?

Benefits of Sharing Our Suffering

Self-Disclosure Humanizes Us

For better or worse, our vocation and title as pastor places us in an “other” category. We are different, or at least people perceive us as different from every other Christian. Self-disclosure, within boundaries, shows the congregation that we, too, encounter and struggle with the everyday matters of Christian discipleship. The proverbial pastor on a pedestal who stands “six feet above contradiction” comes down from the platform to stand and sit among “average” disciples. We become “real people” in the eyes of the listener. The once prominent pastor of Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City, David H. C. Read, shares, “When I was in my teens I listened regularly to a preacher who never made personal references or recounted incidents in his life as a pastor. . . . But there was something lacking in those sermons. They were somewhat remote from our daily life. One felt, This is a *good* man—but does he ever have the kind of experiences *we* have? If I went to him with some practical question would he understand?”¹⁴ In some ways, our “human moments” free us from the façade of being inauthentic, robotic, or superhuman.

Self-Disclosure Connects Us with People and Their Pain

In the chapters that follow, I share several personal examples of pain and suffering. This is not an attempt to throw a pity party or become a metric of comparison for who has suffered most. Rather, by doing so, I hope to show you that I am not simply an “armchair sufferer”—one who thinks he knows what suffering is about but has never played in the game of hard knocks. Over the years, as I have shared my pain from the pulpit, listeners have come up to me after the service and thanked me for my vulnerability. They make comments such as these: “This was the first

14. David H. C. Read, *Preaching about the Needs of Real People* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988), 25.

time I've heard a pastor share so honestly about his life," or, "I'm so glad I'm not alone in this," or, "I also have that condition," or even, "I feel like you really understand me."

As stated in the introduction, pain is the common denominator in life, but success—not so much. People rarely connect with me by rehearsing their résumés, noting their educational credentials, or floating a list of publications. Rather, they connect with me in my weaknesses. As Olds explains, "People connect with your weakness. I can't tell you how many times a person may be in the midst of describing their trouble to me when they stop and suddenly say, 'But you know—don't you? You really know.'"¹⁵

Timothy Beavis provides additional benefits for preaching through pain, especially for the preacher. Beavis concludes:

1. The preacher in pain holds to his divine call to preach as a source of strength and encouragement.
2. The preacher in pain experiences a deep sense of dependence on God's Word and a growing sense of preciousness of His promises.
3. The preacher in pain recognizes a growth in compassion for others.
4. The preacher in pain feels a greater sense of urgency in his work and proclamation.
5. The preacher in pain must make adjustments to his routine, responsibilities and rhythm if he is to sustain ministry.
6. The preacher in pain needs to move from isolation to greater interaction with his friends, counselors and elders.
7. The preacher in pain finds his future hope becoming a bigger theme in his life and ministry.¹⁶

Self-Awareness Is Necessary for Good Leaders

In 1955, psychologists Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingham created the Johari window, a grid for measuring and developing self-awareness used during counseling and therapy sessions.¹⁷ In this exercise, a person chooses adjectives from a list to describe themselves, and then their peers

15. Olds, "Preaching out of Pain."

16. Timothy Beavis, "Preaching in Pain: How Chronic Illness Impacts the Preacher's Ministry" (DMin thesis, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2013), 92–93.

17. Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingham, "The Johari Window: A Graphic Model of Interpersonal Awareness," in *Proceedings of the Western Training Laboratory in Group Development* (Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles, 1955).

also choose adjectives from that same list to describe that person. The responses are charted on the grid, which moves from the unknown, to the hidden, to blind spots, and ultimately to openness about one’s blind spots. This model is a conceptual pathway to consider one’s level of self-awareness in moving toward greater self-awareness.

The Johari Window

	Known to Self	Not Known to Self
Known to Others	OPEN	BLIND SPOTS
Not Known to Others	HIDDEN	UNKNOWN

Many leaders lack self-awareness because they have unknown or hidden areas or small-to-considerable blind spots, or they completely overestimate their leadership abilities. This commonly happens to leaders in any workplace environment. They assume everyone is following them, that they have influence, when in fact their employees act as “independent contractors” with little accountability and do as they please.

A lack of self-awareness also occurs among leaders in the context of the local church. The pastoral leader who is unaware of his or her pain and suffering is quite dangerous. This person who has not acknowledged or dealt with emotional issues may one day erupt on the congregation like a dormant volcano. Wisely sharing about one’s pain and suffering demonstrates a healthy sense of self-awareness, which is highly beneficial for the entire congregation to witness on occasion. Without proper boundaries, however, the pulpit can become an open window into a weekly therapy session where the preacher unknowingly spills his or her pain via stream-of-consciousness communication. Therefore, the preacher needs apt self-awareness as well as trusted others speaking into his or her life.

Self-Disclosure Helps Us Model How to Overcome Suffering and Pain

Finally, perhaps most importantly, self-disclosure (if we have effectively overcome or are in the process of positively working through our pain) can serve as a productive testimony for our listeners. Christians want to follow

those who have struggled and can speak honestly from lessons learned. Of course, that does not mean that we must have experiential knowledge of every type of sin and spiritual malady. Bill Elliff observes, “Pain breaks and molds, educates and deepens. Pain authenticates and prepares. Pain, rightly responded to, gives us something to say.”¹⁸ On a much grander scale, this is why the author of Hebrews writes concerning Jesus, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin” (4:15). Wise and select doses of self-disclosure can be a worthwhile homiletical strategy.

Pastor, How Are You Suffering Today?

We must distinguish at the outset of this book the four major types of suffering: (1) suffering for the sake of Christ, (2) suffering from various illnesses that are out of our control, (3) suffering because of demands placed on us, and (4) suffering on account of our own sinfulness, sinful desires, and poor decisions. These four forms of suffering are not equal.

First, there is the unique challenge of suffering for the sake of Christ.¹⁹ Pastoral weight is real. Souls are at stake. Eternity is in the balance. Rejection is common. Conflict is inevitable. Self-denial—perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of the pastoral calling—is expected. Martyrdom is not a distant reality, especially on the mission field. Sheep bite and then walk or even run away in search of a better shepherd. We may feel the pain of being disrespected or unappreciated, whether verbally or monetarily, overhearing gossip about our spouse or children (more on this later), and much more.

Jesus understood well the emotional pains of ministry, especially seeing his own father turn his face away. Kelly Kapic observes, “The Son fuses himself with our pain, our weakness, our fears, our struggles. . . . In and through the incarnate Christ, God experiences human suffering, undergoing everything from misunderstandings to outright betrayal. . . .

18. Bill Elliff, “Preaching from Pain,” Strategic Renewal, accessed June 25, 2020, <https://www.strategicrenewal.com/preaching-from-pain>.

19. Philip Wagner notices six common areas of pain and suffering for pastors, including criticism, rejection, betrayal, loneliness, weariness, and frustration and disappointment. See Wagner, “The Secret Pain of Pastors,” ChurchLeaders, September 5, 2018, <https://churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/167379-philip-wagner-secret-pain-of-pastors.html>.

Jesus constantly dealt with human agony, [others'] sin, and misery in his own life, and therefore with judgment and death for all the years leading to his own death."²⁰

Second, there is suffering that is out of our control. For instance, we may suffer from physical maladies acute to ministers such as stress and anxiety, diabetes, hypertension, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, ocular challenges, and more. Furthermore, we cannot choose whether we become another victim of cancer or some other illness—terminal or otherwise.

Third, the relentless demands of ministry leave us beaten down and weary. Church leadership and congregants can present impossible demands and expectations. Nonpastors do not and cannot understand the emotional toil and spiritual warfare that come from serving God through full-time pastoral ministry. We are on call twenty-four hours a day and even during holidays and vacations. Even when we are technically off the clock, we lose sleep over Mrs. Johnson's recent cancer diagnosis. We incur financial deficits and duress such as college and seminary loans to be repaid and other economic burdens, so we become bivocational or slog through life living in the red rather than in the black. We seldom save money because our budgets are tightly constricted by hospital bills, medicines, car repairs, and water heaters that need replacement.

Fourth, as we will discuss in chapter 4, we may suffer from poor decision making. Wisdom is a perpetual need in the pastorate and for the Christian. We question God's character in allowing suffering in our lives when in fact we have created our own pain and demise with careless thinking, behaving, and living.

In addition, more specifically, there are at least six possible areas where a preacher could explore his or her pain and suffering in greater depth. In my book *Preaching with Cultural Intelligence*, I provide a short template for "exegeting the preacher" with respect to a pastor's own personal journey and how that affects one's life and preaching.²¹ I encourage a two-step process to facilitate self-exegesis: (1) creating and reflecting upon one's personal time line of highs and lows and (2) writing journal reflections about one's sufferings, especially family dysfunctions, ethnic background, cultural attitudes, and pain.

20. Kopic, *Embodied Hope*, 90–91.

21. See Matthew D. Kim, *Preaching with Cultural Intelligence: Understanding the People Who Hear Our Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 45–61.

Here the goal is to consider pain more intentionally for yourself. Your gut reaction is to probably avoid thinking about pain and painful moments. This is only natural because grief and pain are not linear, one-and-done ordeals. As a goal-oriented person, I do not appreciate setbacks. However, it's clear that pain has setbacks, even prolonged or interminable ones. Suffering comes and goes with the seasons, with every holiday, milestone, and celebration, with annual reminders, birthdays, and anniversaries. I wish that I could begin the journey of grief and healing and have it come to a definitive end—where I stop reliving that issue, moment, decision, trauma, episode, loss, or experience. However, as we know, grief, pain, and suffering don't operate that way. Grief, pain, loss, suffering, and trauma all come in waves and at both expected and unexpected times.

So, how can we take steps forward in this nebulous journey called pain? I would like for us to consider six areas of our lives that may need introspection and healing. Take some time to pray and ask the Holy Spirit to lead you in a process of acknowledging the pain in your life and begin the process toward healing. These areas are (1) physical, pertaining to bodily health, (2) psychological, regarding mental health and well-being, (3) emotional, dealing with heartache and trauma, (4) relational, pertaining to relationships with others, (5) economic, dealing with financial balance and boundaries, and (6) spiritual, having to do with the spiritual warfare and spiritual battles that come with serving God in full-time pastoral ministry.²² In the appendix, you will find a concise worksheet to guide you in this process of self-exploration.

I invite you over the next several weeks to address one of these potential areas of pain and suffering in your life. It is safe to conjecture that you are suffering in at least one of these six areas. Preaching to people in pain includes preaching to ourselves. We are not immune or exempt from various trials. For instance, Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell and Jason Byassee interviewed a number of clergy in preparation of their book *Faithful and Fractured: Responding to the Clergy Health Crisis*. They found that pastors are some of the most physically unhealthy people, reporting that “there is a true crisis in clergy physical health. We believe it stems from the stressors pastors face today and the expectations other people have

22. Kim, *Preaching with Cultural Intelligence*, 58.

of pastors, paired with pastors' expectations of themselves."²³ Not to mention that pastors are often a direct target of spiritual warfare from the enemy. Satan wants every pastor to fall or give up. Start a journal and assess how you are doing in each of these painful pitfalls. If necessary, find a trusted friend or Christian counselor to dig deeper into the lingering trauma or troubles that would benefit from external expertise.

How Is Your Family Suffering?

For pastors who are married and have children, suffering can take on additional challenging forms. Our spouse and children may feel neglected by us because our first allegiance can easily appear to be a marriage to the church. We can act as a nurturing father or mother or caretaker for our parishioners more than for our own children. Rather than attending our kids' events and functions, we sit at church leading business meetings and prayer gatherings. Peter Cha shares the following story: "During my doctoral study years, I (Peter) was also a busy church-planting pastor, making it challenging for me to spend time with my family. One evening, during our dinner, my five-year-old son suddenly blurted out, 'Dad, I think you should get a new job.' Wrestling with feelings of guilt, I asked, 'What kind of job do you want me to get, Nathaniel?' 'Garbage man, Dad,' came the quick reply. Surprised and puzzled, I asked him why, and my young son explained cheerfully, 'Because the garbage man works only on Wednesdays!'"²⁴ It's easy for our spouse and children to feel neglected or abandoned by us. Ministry is relentless and sometimes all-consuming. There were times in pastoral ministry, and there are times now in my work as a seminary professor, when I was so drained by the day's preparations, activities, and events that I had little physical and relational energy left for my family. These are real concerns in vocational pastoral ministry.

Our spouse and children also suffer from our humble salaries. Most pastors live within financial restrictions such that additional income streams are few and far between. "Other kids get to go to fill-in-the-blank-vacation.

23. Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell and Jason Byassee, *Faithful and Fractured: Responding to the Clergy Health Crisis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), xxi.

24. Peter T. Cha and Al Tizon, introduction to *Honoring the Generations: Learning with Asian North American Congregations*, ed. M. Sydney Park, Soong-Chan Rah, and Al Tizon (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 2012), xiii.

Why can't we do those things?" they cry. Our spouse may hint at dissatisfaction with living modestly or meagerly. Due to our financial limitations, our families may not be able to enjoy some commonplace activities, recreation, or choice clothing, eat at restaurants, or purchase technology and gadgets like our parishioners, and this vacuum of pleasure can be devastating for those we love. Maybe we have transitioned to another pastorate but the timing could not have been worse for our children, ripping them away from their friends, social networks, school system, community, and home during the middle of a semester or during their middle school—or, worse, high school—years.

Family members may also encounter the pain of living up to parishioners' expectations, or what F. Belton Joyner Jr. calls "life in the fish bowl."²⁵ Church members expect not only the pastor but also the pastor's spouse and children to speak and behave in certain ways. Often these expectations are culturally perpetuated notions of an ideal pastor's spouse and kids. For example, an unhealthy sense of comparison can be made between the previous and current pastor's spouses. The spouse's and children's attire, accessories and adornments, hairstyles, and sense of fashion; the type of car they drive; their choice of college or lack of education; their occupation, their daily routines—all become gratuitous stumbling blocks for some congregants. And their disapproval makes itself known and felt.

Conclusion

In this first chapter, I have argued for the necessity of self-exploration and self-disclosure among preachers. As key members of the church body, we serve an integral function in helping our congregations deal with and heal from pain and suffering. Our honesty and vulnerability will show the church that it's permissible to be human and not "have it all together." The preacher's self-disclosure of which we are speaking is not a harping on the negative aspects of ministry that only leaves us venting to no avail or even embittered. The sermon isn't a weekly venting session to spew onto the pews one's repressed feelings of anger and resentment and pain.

25. See F. Belton Joyner Jr., *Life in the Fish Bowl: Everyday Challenges of Pastors and Their Families* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006).

And yet there may be positive outcomes from sharing one's life with the church in a way that is communicated winsomely and in ways that don't sound like retaliation or wounding weaponry. Sharing our suffering from the pulpit—with wisdom and timeliness—may be the first step in helping to create a church culture of vulnerability, empathy, and healing. We will speak more of this in the next chapter.

Discussion Questions

1. What kinds of pain are you experiencing today or have you encountered in the past?
2. What areas of pain in your life still need healing from God? Are there any chronic pains that won't go away?
3. How is your family suffering today?
4. Do you feel comfortable sharing your pain from the pulpit? Why or why not?