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Through the Valley of Darkness: Spiritual Formation for Pain Sufferers Within the Context of Evangelicalism Today

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

THROUGH THE VALLEY OF DARKNESS:
SPIRITUAL FORMATION FOR PAIN SUFFERERS WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF
EVANGELICALISM TODAY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF PORTLAND SEMINARY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

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PORTLAND, OREGON

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Portland Seminary
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

DMin Dissertation

This is to certify that the DMin Dissertation of

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has been approved by
the Dissertation Committee on February 14, 2019
for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Leadership and Spiritual Formation.

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DEDICATION

To my wife Mary, who has been an incredible, living letter of how to live in the midst of unrelenting chronic pain. Your crown will be of great heavenly weight.

. . . unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

—Jesus, John 12:34 ESV

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ABSTRACT

Chronic pain sufferers can find themselves on the margins of evangelical culture in the United States. Evangelicals are largely guided by a paradigm of power, an ethos that finds little room for the hurting and disabled. Pain sufferers do not fit into such a paradigm; their physical limitations can prevent them from contributing to the evangelical church's efforts to extend their influence. It is not that pain sufferers are ignored by evangelicals; many churches have some type of ministry function to assist them. The issue is that they are not valued in their current state of suffering.

Spiritual formation for many evangelicals is centered around community activities that can be challenging for people with chronic pain to participate in. An over-emphasis on communal expressions rather than personal devotion places spiritually formative experiences outside the reach of some chronic pain sufferers. This dissertation considers various solutions within the church to meet the spiritual and emotional needs of chronic pain sufferers.

Section One states the problem. Section Two looks at the current cultural/theological landscape within evangelicalism and how its paradigm of power excludes chronic pain sufferers. I then extract some ideas from Job's account of personal suffering. I also look at the solutions offered by the contemporary signs and wonders movement among some Pentecostal churches, and finish with some of the thinking within contemporary Eastern Orthodoxy. Section Three is my thesis, that chronic pain sufferers embrace their thorn in the flesh as Paul does in 2 Corinthians 12. Section Four describes the artifact, a book entitled *Spiritual Help for Chronic Pain: Three Phases of Spiritual Transformation*. Section Five describes the specifications for the artifact through a book

proposal. Section Six is the summation of what I have learned through my dissertation process.

SECTION 1:
THE MINISTRY NEED/PROBLEM/OPPORTUNITY

Many people who live with chronic physical pain experience a diminished capacity to fully participate in life's activities. The pain that individuals experience is not limited to their physical bodies; there is associated emotional and, at times, spiritual suffering as well. Chronic pain presents greater living challenges due to the consuming, acute nature of the condition. Pain is debilitating and it inhibits a person's ability to experience a full life. The negative effects of pain make day-to-day living an ongoing struggle, which often diminishes the sufferer's joy. A sense of disappointment creeps into their lives and the desire to grow spiritually wanes; all they can think about is survival and what they are missing out on.

Introduction

Chronic pain is a condition that plagues millions of Americans and causes unexpected, disruptive changes to their lives. Chronic pain is defined as pain that persists beyond acute pain, typically for over six months. It can be initiated with an injury or disease, but may persist after the triggering injury has healed.¹ The National Institute of Health has defined chronic pain as persistent, ongoing pain. The Institute's formal definition of chronic pain notes:

While acute pain is a normal sensation triggered in the nervous system to alert you to possible injury and the need to take care of yourself, chronic pain is different. Chronic pain persists. Pain signals keep firing in the nervous system for weeks, months, even years. There may have been an initial mishap—sprained

¹ "Chronic Pain," Nature.com, accessed March 19, 2018, <https://www.nature.com/subjects/chronic-pain>.

back, serious infection, or there may be an ongoing cause of pain—arthritis, cancer, ear infection, but some people suffer chronic pain in the absence of any past injury or evidence of body damage.²

There are numerous medical conditions and situations encountered by people which cause chronic pain. As noted in the above definition, chronic pain is a condition that can persist for years, and, in some cases, is a lifelong ailment people are forced to endure. Those faced with the prospect of lifelong chronic pain are the primary focus of this paper. A chronic pain condition does not provide much hope for a quality of life. Pastoral ministry can address the emotional and spiritual needs to provide a person with direction that not only aids in their ability to cope, but helps them find a path where they can rise above their physical condition and thrive spiritually.

An estimated 116 million adults in the United States experience chronic pain. The same study reported an annual national economic cost associated with chronic pain estimated to be \$560-635 billion.³ An astounding statistic is that chronic pain affects more Americans than diabetes, heart disease, strokes, and cancer combined.⁴ This statistic should alert us that chronic pain is a common problem and that we are just as likely to encounter people suffering from chronic pain as we do with those who suffer from diabetics, cancer, and heart disease.

The onset of a painful physical condition in a person's body is usually accompanied by a hope that medical science or a divine miracle can address the condition

² "Chronic Pain Information Page," National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, 2017, <https://www.ninds.nih.gov/Disorders/All-Disorders/Chronic-Pain-Information-Page>.

³ Institute of Medicine (US) Committee on Advancing Pain Research, Care, and Education, *Relieving Pain in America: A Blueprint for Transforming Prevention, Care, Education, and Research* (Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press, 2011), 1, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK92525/>.

⁴ "AAPM Facts and Figures on Pain," The American Academy of Pain Medicine, accessed March 16, 2018, http://www.painmed.org/patientcenter/facts_on_pain.aspx#top.

causing such pain, and that the person can be healed and eventually resume their normal activities. Such hopeful expectation to recover is not only reasonable, but is a positive indicator in a person's potential recovery. However, when a painful condition becomes chronic, hope can diminish as a person with pain struggles to settle into a routine and accept their new "normal." As hope subsides, depression can settle in. Solomon describes how disappointment can affect us emotionally as he writes: "hope deferred makes the heart sick" (Prov. 13:12).

Chronic pain by itself is difficult to deal with, and the inability to fully function physically can lead to other issues that compound the hardships of the pain sufferer's life. Along with physical suffering, there are also the mental, emotional, spiritual, social, and financial difficulties that chronic pain can bring. Faced with what appears to be an array of insurmountable issues, it is easy to see where a pain patient loses hope. In the face of such difficult, overwhelming circumstances, some chronic pain sufferers lack the biblical and spiritual understanding to guide their formation, which could be of some help in dealing with the five states of wellness listed above.

Physical/Medical Concerns

Pain patients normally experience limited mobility compared to their life prior to their injury or illness. Their physical pain either prevents them from certain activities or curtails the amount of time they can participate. For example, those who experience chronic back pain may be unable to stand or sit for long periods of time. Some patients are prescribed medication that impairs their ability to drive or operate heavy machinery. Constant pain can be so intense that the person becomes fully consumed by their pain. Most of their attention is focused on trying to cope with the pain and seeking avenues of

relief. Such limitations can cause a person to lose their independence and feel like a burden to others. A loss of independence is difficult for most people; more so if the person lived an active and productive lifestyle prior to their injury or illness.

Many chronic pain sufferers report that their pain hinders their ability to sleep well. The National Sleep Foundation estimates that 20 percent of American adults (42 million people) report that pain or physical discomfort disrupts their sleep a few nights or more each week.⁵ Among chronic pain sufferers, it is estimated that 50 to 80 percent have ongoing sleep difficulties.⁶ Loss of sleep, coupled with constant pain, can compound stress on their emotions. In a report from Harvard Medical School, poor or inadequate sleep can cause irritability and stress. Chronic insomnia may increase the risk of a mood disorder such as depression.⁷ When irritability, stress, and depression are combined with the presence of ongoing physical pain, a vicious cycle develops, further complicating a pain patient's ability to cope with their condition.

The opioid crisis has created an array of potential difficulties for chronic pain sufferers. There are legitimate concerns over the abuse of opioids. The National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine report that from the years 1999 to 2011, the annual number of overdose deaths from prescription opioids nearly tripled.⁸

There are people who abuse their medication by self-prescribing rather than following

⁵ "Sleep in America Poll, 2000," National Sleep Foundation, accessed March 16, 2018, <http://www.sleepfoundation.org>, 2000.

⁶ William Deardorff, "Chronic Pain and Insomnia: Breaking the Cycle," Spine Health, December 12, 2016, <https://www.spine-health.com/wellness/sleep/chronic-pain-and-insomnia-breaking-cycle>.

⁷ "Sleep and Mood," The Division of Sleep Medicine at Harvard University, Get Sleep, December 15, 2008, <http://healthysleep.med.harvard.edu/need-sleep/whats-in-it-for-you/mood>.

⁸ "Pain Management and the Opioid Epidemic, Balancing Societal and Individual Benefits and Risks of Prescription Opioid," Consensus Study Report Use, July 2017, The National Academies of Science Engineering and Medicine, https://www.nap.edu/resource/24781/Highlights_071317_Opioids.pdf.

their doctor's orders regarding their pain management. Sometimes, the problem is due to a patient not receiving adequate pain management from an unsympathetic physician. Unfortunately, there are also those who attempt to use narcotics to deal with other pain-related symptoms such as depression or sleep deprivation.

However, abuse of prescribed medicine has produced an atmosphere that has created unnecessary hurdles for chronic pain patients to negotiate. Many pain patients stay within the boundaries of their prescribed medications, yet at times, they need additional pain relief due to overexertion or aggravating their injury. Chronic pain sufferers can be forced to endure the indignity of suspicion and even denial of needed treatment from medical and mental health personnel.

The opioid crisis has been precipitated by patients who self-medicate and physicians who do not manage their cases well and live under the threats of malpractice litigation. A study in 2010 of closed malpractice claims involving prescription opioids indicated that "82 percent of cases involved patients who were non-cooperative in their care, physicians who inappropriately managed prescriptions, or both."⁹ This crisis is a vicious circle of overreactions from all parties, preventing some patients from receiving adequate pain treatment for their discomfort.

Pain patients can suffer the indignity of being identified as a "drug seeker," and the associated emotional abuse from uncaring or unresponsive medical or mental health professionals who have become jaded in their practice. My wife went through a long period of intense pain and related physical issues where she endured mistreatment from

⁹ Tori Rodriguez, "Chronic Pain Management Malpractice Claims: Insight Into Underlying Causes," *Clinical Pain Advisor*, December 12, 2017, <https://www.clinicalpainadvisor.com/practice-management/malpractice-claims-in-chronic-pain-management-patient-noncompliance-inadequate-clinical-judgement/article/713220/>

emergency room personnel, even though her medical records clearly indicated her compliance with all her physicians. The breakdown of trust between the patient and medical provider exacerbates the emotional state of the patient, further making them prone to depression. The frustration of not having proper medical treatment leads some to self-prescribe, which, when discovered, further encourages mistrust from the physician.

Some pain patients become addicted to their medications. Often those who are addicted enter a state of denial and attempt to justify their self-prescriptions. I have witnessed strong denial among Christians; drug addiction is for “those people” who do not know Christ. The denial becomes communal; friends or family who cannot understand how a Christian could become addicted to drugs. Dishonesty and manipulation tactics become a normalized state of behavior for the addict, and their downward spiral—medically, emotionally, and spiritually—continues. In moments of clarity, the addict may feel shame or guilt due to their behavior, but the medical necessity for pain medication prevents them from obtaining the help they need. Pain patients who struggle with addiction problems are at risk of being unfairly judged by the Christian community, particularly those who neither understand addiction nor pain treatment and expect the person to immediately stop abusing medication as proof that they are “repentant.”

Emotional/Mental Concerns

Chronic pain can have a strong effect on the emotional state of some pain sufferers. It is not uncommon for pain patients to feel great stress due to their physical condition, which opens a door for depression. Depression can increase the level of pain that patients experience. As a person’s pain increases, they can become more prone to

depression and stress, creating a pain and depression cycle that can be difficult to get under control.¹⁰ For some people, the stress and depression associated with chronic pain can become consuming, and has the potential to significantly worsen and prolong their pain. An article published by Harvard Health Publishing notes, “pain is depressing, and depression causes and intensifies pain. People with chronic pain have three times the average risk of developing psychiatric symptoms—usually mood or anxiety disorders—and depressed patients have three times the average risk of developing chronic pain.”¹¹ In older adults who suffer chronic pain, it is estimated that 19 to 28 percent of these patients experience depression, compared with 2 to 4 percent of the general older adult population.¹²

Chronic pain can also create difficulties for patients in their social circles. It is not unusual for others to believe that chronic pain sufferers are malingering or exaggerating, have too low of a threshold to endure pain, or are seeking attention or wanting access to pain medication. Such suspicion and lack of empathy erodes personal relationships and trust.

Financial Concerns

There can also be financial issues chronic pain contributes toward. Some pain patients have difficulty being able to sit, stand, or walk for prolonged periods of time.

¹⁰ William W. Deardorff, “Tips to Help Cope with Chronic Pain and Depression,” Spine Health, July 1, 2016, <https://www.spine-health.com/conditions/depression/4-tips-help-cope-chronic-pain-and-depression>.

¹¹ Harvard Medical School, “Depression and Pain: Hurting Bodies and Suffering Minds Often Require the Same Treatment,” Harvard Health Publishing, Harvard Medical School, March 21, 2017, <https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/depression-and-pain>.

¹² Ivan R. Molton and Alexandra L. Terrill, “Overview of Persistent Pain in Older Adults,” *American Psychologist* 69, no. 2 (February-March 2014): 197–207, <https://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/releases/amp-a0035794.pdf>.

Finding a job that can accommodate permanent disabilities can be difficult. Social Security disability benefits are available for those who qualify, but such benefits do not provide a sustainable income in most parts of the country. In the case of single adults, it assigns them to a fixed income and a low standard of living. Where I live, for instance, disability compensation does not match the cost of living; most rental units cost most of a disabled person's income. This creates not only a financial hardship on a person with disability, but also often limits their selection of where they can live, as many landlords and property managers require their tenant's income to be a certain percentage above the amount of monthly rent. It is a subtle form of economic redlining that goes beyond a person's race.

Spiritual Concerns

Another area where chronic pain sufferers experience challenges is understanding the spiritual and theological context of suffering and how it applies to their condition. How does chronic pain affect us spiritually? Why does God permit these things to happen to people, particularly those who love him? It is not uncommon for those who suffer to believe that their experience of physical pain and its associated problems contradicts biblical claims of abundant life for Christians. Their life experience appears to contradict biblical promises of God's protection, blessing, and empowerment. Questions that chronic pain sufferers find themselves asking are: why does God permit this, or what is the purpose behind all this, and they are not always met with satisfactory answers. These questions can be rooted in a feeling of being abandoned by God (even if it is temporary), or that God in some way does not love them as He does others. There is also the thought

that chronic pain is a result of sin in their lives. Such unanswered questions can plague the hearts of people who are desperate to understand their situation.

Socio-religious Concerns

Closely associated with spiritual and theological challenges are the socio-religious issues that a chronic pain sufferer must endure. It is common for the pain sufferer to become the special project of individuals within the Christian community. The pain patient is usually grateful for the assistance, but help can be given in such a way that the person feels like a project rather than a valued member of a church community. At times, ministry is given in such a way that is convenient for the caregiver, but overlooks the personal preferences or choices of the sufferer. They become an object through which others fulfill their “Christian duty,” rather than being recognized as someone who can edify others within the Body of Christ.¹³ Such an attitude short-circuits the biblical admonition to “bear one another’s burdens,” which, in the context of that passage, describes mutual accountability and care (Gal. 6:1-2).

Eugene Peterson notes that “sufferers attract fixers in the same way roadkills attract vultures.”¹⁴ In my own experience, fixers rarely understand the difficulties of what a pain sufferer goes through each day. Most fixers believe that the sufferer’s problems can be resolved pragmatically and simplistically, offering quick fix solutions to problems that are not only complex, but beyond their expertise to evaluate and remediate. Those who focus on fixing others can lack the capacity to see that their own actions or

¹³ Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2011), 79.

¹⁴ Eugene Peterson, “Introduction to Job,” in *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), 840.

recommendations are usually detrimental rather than encouraging. At times, the fixer only wants to fulfill their need for a sense of self-worth, where “ministry” is more about meeting some unmet need in their own life. Such ministry is generally short-lived; once a fixer achieves their sense of fulfillment, or service becomes too high of a cost, the assistance ends, and the sufferer is left bewildered and hurt.

Fixers also like to counsel. Many of them are well-versed in the scriptures, yet they can lack the ability to comprehend the application. The spiritual direction they give can be of great encouragement, or it can be ill-spoken words that do not comfort, but rather inflame the chronic pain sufferer’s sense of bewilderment and abandonment. They become like Job’s counselors.¹⁵ Chronic pain people can become a captive audience to those looking to bolster their own sense of spiritual importance. When the pain patient resists such advice, manipulative tactics and misuse of scripture are employed to regain control and influence.

There is always the possibility that a chronic pain sufferer will be misunderstood by others. Many people do not understand how chronic pain affects those who suffer from it. People who have never suffered severe pain for a prolonged period of time may attempt to superimpose their own experience of physical pain upon the sufferer, and question (at times condescendingly) why they cannot rebound physically in the same manner as someone who recovers from a broken leg. These people can look at a pain sufferer as weak-minded, having a low tolerance of pain, not having the mental or spiritual strength to endure their situation, or wondering why these people simply cannot

¹⁵ Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite (Job 2:11). These three friends of Job are facetiously called “Job’s counselor’s” because of their inaccurate advice given in the discourse recorded in Job 3-31. Later, Elihu, the son of Barachel the Buzite contributes to the discussion (Job 32), only to reveal his own lack of understanding.

“get on with their life.” There are also those individuals who accuse the pain sufferer of faking their injury or exaggerating their condition and then shift their accusations toward selfish motives—which are not proven—as to why the person’s chronic pain condition continues. When a pain patient has a string of some “good days,” some people will presume that the person is getting adequate pain relief and is now better. Many people think linearly; that is, they see a line of progression, and when a person fluctuates between feeling better or worse, people become unduly critical and make judgments that are beyond their comprehension.

Chronic pain is perplexing, both to the sufferer and those around them. These unresolved issues and questions can feed feelings of isolation. Sufferers become someone others don’t know how to deal with. Their condition is an abnormality in our modern worldview and places the sufferer in the uncomfortable position of having to regularly explain their condition. The speculations can be endless and it can feel like a chronic pain person is always the subject of someone else’s impulsive speculation and criticism. Some sufferers see their life as living on a deserted island surrounded by a sea of confusion.

When these factors are combined, life can become quite a challenge for the chronic pain sufferer. When a person is living with chronic pain that prevents them from working and having an active social life, where they feel like they are someone’s “project,” and they feel that God has not been good to them, spiritual formation is the last thing on their mind. For some pain sufferers, it is enough of a struggle just to be able to make it to a church service a few times a month; having a daily time of Bible reading and prayer may be too much for them. With the weight of all that they may have to bear, one

more project added to the daily activity of trying to stay comfortable and coherent may be beyond their capacity.

My Context

In my church, most of our congregants are over 55; many are over 65 and retired. It is estimated that 60 to 75 percent of people over the age of 65 report at least some persistent pain.¹⁶ Our experience bears these statistics out as many of our senior members have chronic pain issues relating to their back, shoulders, knees, hips, and joints. Some have had hip or knee replacements due to chronic pain. Most of them endure their pain, and they strive to maintain an active lifestyle, including keeping a vital relationship with God. Others appear to have “checked out” from engaging in most activities. They have isolated themselves and feed their minds with whatever ideas they enter into the search engine of their internet browser.

Just over 31 years ago, my wife, Mary, then in her mid-twenties, worked in a crowded office as a medical claims examiner. The building was too small to accommodate all the workstations and libraries needed. Mary found herself with a complex medical claim to process and left her work station to retrieve some manuals to guide her. While carrying approximately 25 pounds of manuals in her arms, she made her way back to her work station. As she was about to turn a corner, one of her coworkers was walking the other direction. There wasn't enough room in the aisle for them to pass each other, so Mary stepped back to allow the other person through. Not seeing a stack of manuals behind her, she tripped over them and fell backward. As she fell, she caught a

¹⁶ Molton and Terrill, “Overview of Persistent Pain in Older Adults.”

glimpse of the corner of a bookcase and twisted quickly to avoid hitting her head on the corner. She hit the floor and immediately felt a pain in her lower back.

Thinking she only need a few muscle relaxers and then she would recover, she went home to rest. That night, she experienced excruciating pain in her lower back. She visited a doctor, who prescribed pain medication and ordered some tests, including an MRI. Mary had to take time off work, as some days she could barely dress herself or walk out to the car. The MRI didn't provide many clues and she was sent to a psychologist, who determined this was all in her mind, or she that was malingering her condition.

After nine agonizing months without any positive progress of her condition, she was sent to a group of specialists in San Francisco. A neurosurgeon evaluated the MRI results and felt that the films were not good images to make a proper diagnosis of her condition. He decided to have a Discogram done on one of her spinal discs, which confirmed what he had suspected—a ruptured disc.

Mary had surgery, recovered, and returned to work and lived a relatively normal life. She still experienced some nerve pain and needed to have her work station designed by a physical therapist to resume working. Some of her coworkers were critical, believing that she had exaggerated her symptoms and they were not happy about the concessions made to assist her return to work.

A few years went by and Mary began to experience increasingly severe pain. She had developed bone spurs in her spine that needed to be surgically removed. Although the surgery went well, a severe infection flared up in her spine from exposure in the

surgery room, and she needed six surgeries in four days to remove the infected area.

These procedures further damaged her spine and has left her with constant severe pain.

After these series of surgeries, Mary underwent numerous treatments and procedures. Her first option was surgically implanting a spinal cord stimulator. This form of treatment worked well for a few years, but eventually her nerve died and the treatment stopped working. Although four different surgeons attempted to implant different stimulators with numerous surgical revisions, there was no alleviating her pain.

Mary went through several months of constant, severe pain that left her bedridden. She lost a considerable amount of weight and looked like she was going to wither away. A central line was surgically implanted into one of her main arteries, which she lived with for over two years. It was finally decided to attempt an intrathecal pump (also known as a pain pump) that would deliver a low dose of pain medicine directly to her spine.

Intrathecal pump therapy has worked considerably well, although it has not been without complications. One issue is that the lifespan of the pump is only about five years, which then requires surgery to remove and replace it with a new unit. The catheter that delivers the medication can become occluded. They need to be refilled every few months, which is a delicate procedure that requires a specialist. In a strange incident, Mary's pump flipped over, preventing it from being refilled and required surgery to reposition it.

While Mary is ambulatory, her rehabilitation physician refused to sign a release that would allow her to return to work. She has been medically retired for approximately 17 years. Even with a pain pump, she is not pain free and must be careful not to

overextend her activities. Despite the pain, she is active in her church and takes care of many details, as is common for a pastor's wife of a small congregation.

With all the difficulties Mary experiences, does she walk with God, further developing her spiritual formation, or does she become angry with God, resisting His grace that is sufficient for the day? There is always the battle with unanswered questions as to why this happened, or why she hasn't been healed. She has experienced all the above socio-religious problems, such as being misunderstood or held in suspicion by others, and encountering those who wanted to turn her into a project. She has endured well-meaning but uninformed counsel from fixers. She has experienced the indignity of being treated as a drug seeker, but thankfully has found some very good, compassionate medical providers. She has also had to navigate the difficulties of others who experience some form of pain—whether chronic or temporary—who looked to Mary to help them supplement their pain medicine.

Chronic pain is a difficult maze to navigate—not only the physical pain, but also the emotional, social, and spiritual issues surrounding it. She has learned to trust God with her pain and her unanswered questions. There must be substance to trusting God that affects how we live rather than simply making a shallow profession. This is a choice she makes daily, not only by believing it, but by engaging her personal devotional life to seek after God, her source of spiritual comfort and strength, as she lives one day at a time.

SECTION 2: OTHER PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

Christians have made various attempts to relieve chronic pain sufferers from their discomfort. In this section, I will engage with a few possibilities that various parts of the Body of Christ focus on to help chronic pain sufferers. In this section, I will examine the modern conservative, evangelical church, how their paradigm is difficult for chronic pain sufferers to participate in, and why they can find themselves on the margins in evangelical church settings.

Modernist Epistemology, American Evangelicalism, and its Relationship to Chronic Pain Sufferers

This segment explores the influence of modernism upon the evangelical church¹⁷ in the United States, and how their focus on progress, reason, and pragmatism has informed their practical theology.

Where is the place for chronic pain sufferers within the Body of Christ? Specifically, where do they fit in the context of a local church? While the answer to this question will vary based on the views of each individual church, there are some common threads of influence within evangelicalism. In some modern evangelical churches, the emphasis, both explicitly and implicitly, is on numerical growth, which enables churches

¹⁷ Defining evangelicalism is difficult, as it has multiplied into various distinctions, some of which are not compatible with others. While there are exceptions to every rule, what has developed since the 1960s is the popularization of independent churches that have strong hierarchical governance where the “Senior Pastor” has autonomous oversight over his church. These churches are often conservative politically and culturally. Some examples of this group within evangelicalism are Calvary Chapel, some Baptist and Pentecostal churches, and many independent, conservative churches. It is a group that might be best defined as the contemporary predecessors of the Fundamentalist movement of the early twentieth century who opt for a simple hermeneutic and application. These churches come in all sizes, from under 100 attenders, to megachurches with multiple sites.

to provide even more goods and services to their communities. More goods and services also attract more people; to some degree, the growth process is circular.

Modern evangelical church models need many volunteers to enable their weekly programs to succeed. Because of this need, the emphasis on service is often stressed in evangelical churches. However, it is out of reach for some who suffer from chronic pain. This creates feelings of isolation and inferiority. With Christian service being touted as a virtue, chronic pain sufferers can find themselves questioning the goodness of God because of their limitations to serve.

Cultural Influence

While the church often sees itself as counter-cultural, it possesses the same Western cultural worldview as secularism. Cultural influence is unavoidable; it surrounds us and affects our thinking. Culture is like the air we breathe. We are often unaware of it, but it is integrated into our existence and provides our epistemological sense of interpreting the world. The cultural norms where we live influence what we value and establish the patterns of what we consider normal behavior. Western modernist values shaped our society's thinking, which long ago became normative.

The English Oxford Living Dictionary defines culture as “the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively.”¹⁸ Intellectual achievements attained through a collective process portray communal values and ethics that guide the discovery process. As such, our collective knowledge guides our ideas, social behaviors, and customs. The era of the Enlightenment, with its focus on reason,

¹⁸ *The English Oxford Living Dictionary*, s.v. “culture,” accessed October 3, 2018, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/culture>.

rational thinking, and discovery of objective knowledge brought Western culture into the modern age. The goals of progress to improve the quality of our lives and eliminate human suffering have been woven into the fabric of our thinking and inform our expectations.

The Enlightenment's focus was the intellectual quest to unlock the secrets of the universe so that the natural order could be controlled and benefit humanity.¹⁹ This is the goal of Western civilization: continuing progress in understanding and controlling nature through advancement in the sciences. The modern worldview and sense of empowerment that are reinforced by technological advances fosters an expectation of progress and the belief that "man is the measure of all things."²⁰ This autonomous sense of knowledge and accomplishment is what modernists value. All of us are influenced by the environment we are in. For some evangelicals, their quest for progress becomes a quest for growth.

While a matter of strong debate, some church historians attempt to trace the Enlightenment's influence on the church to the time of Jonathan Edwards and his contemporaries.²¹ These men were considered progressives in their day as they wrestled with and wrote about the possibilities of progress through reasoning. It is impossible to establish the level of influence the Enlightenment had on these leaders of early evangelical thought, but it is safe to say that the church has always been influenced to

¹⁹ Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 2.

²⁰ This saying is attributed to Protagoras of Abdera (c. 480-410 B.C).

²¹ David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*, 47-48, quoted in Garry J. Williams, *The Advent of Evangelicalism: Exploring Historical Continuities* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2008), 347-349. It is important to note that Williams' engagement is critical of Bebbington's assertion that the evangelical doctrine of assurance of salvation arose from Enlightenment epistemology.

some degree by secular culture. Their work in soteriology created a platform of certainty; a view, I might add, that I agree with, but it had some unforeseen consequences.

Gospel presentations are not only about certainty, but the promise of a better life. This sense of confidence is evident today, particularly in conservative evangelical circles, and it is not limited to assurance of salvation. From Billy Graham's assertions that "you can know beyond a shadow of a doubt you are saved,"²² or apologetic works such as *The Case for Christ*, to the sense of dogmatism regarding doctrines/systematic theologies that creates disunity in the church, American evangelicals confidently hold to their views regarding the faith. Such dogmatism has been characteristic of much of evangelicalism (the exception possibly being those who label themselves as "emergent") into the late twentieth century. A clear-cut, black-and-white, either/or epistemological structure informs their thinking, analysis, and doctrinal construction, which, among other things, produces a rigid understanding of life as a series of causes and effects. The biblical foundation for this view is based on passages that warn us that we reap what we sow.²³ There is the expectation as one "sows to the Spirit," they should generally receive God's blessing to live free of disease. Conversely, those who suffer from illness or injury may be considered under God's correction and chastening. Those with a "reap what you sow" theology, like Job's counselors, cannot grasp the idea of the righteous suffering; it is a mystery for which people feel the need to provide an explanation, and the verses on sowing and reaping provide a logical argument.

²² A term commonly used by evangelical pastors, particularly in evangelistic appeals. Billy Graham, *Wisdom for Each Day* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2008), 240. See also Adrian Rodgers, *Love Worth Finding* (N.p.: Crossway, 2016), <https://www.crossway.org/tracts/love-worth-finding-4169/>.

²³ This principle is addressed in the both Testaments and is intended to stress personal accountability in one's relationship with God (Job 4:8; Prov. 1:31, 11:18; Psa. 126:5; Hos. 8:7, 10:12; Gal. 6:7).

Salesmen for Christ

The incorporation of modernism, rationalism, and a focus on progress fostered ideas of optimism, prosperity,²⁴ and the avoidance or elimination of suffering. This mindset transformed how the gospel was presented. This was evident in the evangelistic track entitled *The Four Spiritual Laws*, by Bill Bright of Cru, formerly known as Campus Crusade for Christ. The message of the track consisted of “four spiritual laws” that were designed to present the gospel message and call an individual to commit themselves to Christ. The first law, “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life,” exemplified modernistic thinking through a promise of progress and fulfillment by the power of God. This first “law” drastically influenced how Christians pursued expectations of blessing, prosperity (either materially or spiritually), and prominence. This was a highly successful evangelistic tool in the turbulent 1960s and early 1970s. Christianity was marketed by street evangelists as being the way out from under the problems of life.

Bright’s track is true, and rests on a strong biblical foundation. A confidence in assurance of salvation was morphed into a gospel presentation that becoming a Christian is the means toward some form of happiness and prosperity. The problem appears when what we consider a “wonderful plan” doesn’t come to fruition.

Church Growth, Consumerism, and Power

Evangelicalism grafted into modernity found fertile soil in the advent of the church growth movement of the late twentieth century. The management and

²⁴ Kate Bowler, “Blessed,” interview by Peter Sien, *C-Span, Book TV*, March 18, 2014, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?318386-3/blessed>. The prosperity gospel has influenced evangelicalism with its emphasis on prosperity and upward mobility. Bowler identifies the prosperity gospel as an “offshoot of Pentecostalism that developed special vocabulary for how exactly faith reaches out into the invisible and brings back material things . . . they were surprisingly material.”

organizational methodologies that produced numerical growth were defended by an ideology of pragmatism²⁵ that simply stated “if it works, it must be of God,” pointing to their impressive growth numbers as evidence of God’s purpose and blessing. Michael Gama observes that “since its inception 50-60 plus years ago, evangelicalism in North America has been a growth industry. Viewed from a marketing perspective, a product enjoys increasing market share so long as its ‘buyers’ see it as a worthy solution to a perceived problem.”²⁶ The realization of the wonderful life is realized, in part, by excitement of being a part of a huge, growing movement with a church community.

According to Richard Abanes, author of *Rick Warren and the Purpose that Drives Him*, Rick Warren began Saddleback Church by conducting door-to-door surveys to help him identify “felt needs” that his church could meet and thus appeal to his new community.²⁷ This has been highly successful for Saddleback Church and the numerous churches that have used this method, but it reinforces what is already prevalent—a consumeristic mentality where we have the same expectations of the church as we do those who provide our daily goods and services. The message is subconscious, yet it is clear: the church is here to meet your needs.

In the fervor for mass evangelism, a methodology of pragmatism based empirically on their success was unwittingly developed. While biblical principles are not pushed aside, their focus seems to be on the values of success and growth, and any

²⁵ Pragmatism, as a philosophical school, was a product of Post-Enlightenment nineteenth-century Modernism.

²⁶ Michael Paul Gama, “Theosis: The Core of Our Ancient/Future Faith and Its Relevance to Evangelicalism at the Close of the Modern Era,” (DMin dissertation, Portland Seminary, 2014), <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/dmin/74>, 81-84.

²⁷ Richard Abanes, *Rick Warren and the Purpose that Drives Him: An Insider Looks at the Phenomenal Bestseller* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2005), 47-48.

methodology that produces these results. In the process, the church's main "mission" is growth, and every church ministry is influenced by this purpose.

God's wonderful plan for our life finds its expression on a corporate level, where every milestone of growth is celebrated, God is thanked, and those who serve in such churches have a sense of excitement of being at the center of God's purposes and presence. It becomes a machine that needs fuel to keep running. Such perspectives are not limited to the size of the church, although large churches have the capacity to shout these values from their rooftops.

The megachurch phenomenon has been highly influential in American evangelicalism. Megachurches have set the standards of what constitutes a church today, and many smaller churches attempt to follow suit. The goods and services that modern churches provide require a host of volunteer laborers to keep them operational. Churches who have enough volunteers have the ability to staff food services or other hospitality ministries, and bookstores to assist their guests in having a good Sunday morning experience. Along with these ministries, there is the need for volunteers who contribute toward a quality Sunday morning production, such as sound, lighting, video, and web technicians, worship team members, greeters, ushers, parking lot attendants, and children's ministry workers. What is communicated to the volunteers is that in serving in these ministries, they are serving the Lord and demonstrating their spiritual commitment and maturity. These church programs require an army of volunteers who have healthy bodies and minds. People with disabilities, including chronic pain sufferers, are not valued in such a culture because they do not contribute to the overall effort of fulfilling the mission.

It needs to be noted that churches of all sizes cannot operate without people willing to serve, and often such service is in a volunteer capacity. Service is one of the callings of the church, but it is not the ultimate expression of our relationship with God. The emphasis on service, along with low-level marketing by congregants, has been the means through which most churches, both large and small, operate. Congregants have always been encouraged to invite people to church and it has been an effective means to evangelize. Yet, when these methodologies become the means and end, pastoral work becomes more about managing human capital than caring for people. As Jessica Johnson, a University of Washington anthropology professor, describes, the phenomenon where devotion to church, and the celebrity pastor who leads them, creates subcultural values that are grafted into an individual's sense of devotion. She notes:

Congregants not only contribute money to the megachurch by tithing but also generate capital by advertising their pastor's name and legitimizing his spiritual authority: they buy his books, share his podcasts, "like" his *Facebook* status updates, and re-tweet his tweets. In effect, the very definition of a megachurch entails a marketing prerogative that is linked to the labor and sacrifice of members whose evangelical identity is constituted by said labor and sacrifice.²⁸

If these are the markings of evangelical spiritual identity, those with chronic pain can find themselves on the margins of these communities. Many of the volunteer ministries listed above may not work well for chronic pain sufferers. Their ability to contribute toward these communities, which is taught as an important part of their relationship with God, is hampered by their physical limitations.

Everything a church does in the performance of their various functions preaches what is valuable to their congregants and models for them the behaviors they should

²⁸ Jessica Johnson, "Megachurches, Celebrity Pastors, and the Evangelical Industrial Complex," *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, 3rd ed., ed. Bruce Forbes and Jeffrey Mahan (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 162.

produce. Evangelical churches whose actions convey a message of control and influence imply a message of personal autonomy that can neglect the idea of dependency upon Christ. Chronic pain patients find themselves on the outside of such a social narrative simply because their experience does not fit this modern paradigm. There is a contradiction in the experience of pain and physical suffering from a metanarrative that proclaims promises of fulfillment, God's wonderful plan, forward progress, and pain avoidance. By not receiving the least of these, as defined biblically, evangelicalism has lost a portion of comprehending what it means to enter the fellowship of his suffering, and part of their spiritual growth is stunted (Phil. 3:10).

If the evangelical church only understands a spiritual model that focuses on having our desires met, along with being a part of the movement focused on success exemplified by numerical growth, we overlook other possibilities of how God may desire to make known His presence to us and expand our spiritual understanding beyond the currently dominant narrative. The church that operates from a position of strength—numerically, financially, and culturally—doesn't teach people how to suffer well. Rather, we relegate the role of the suffering to Christians in third-world countries or Islamic nations, or something only the early church endured, rather than preparing people who will possibly encounter some form of physical suffering in their lives.

Evangelical culture is not wired to embrace suffering and pain. Unlike Catholicism, we have taken Jesus down from the cross and minimized the Incarnation in favor of a glorified Christ who will one day return with vengeance and judgment. Modern evangelicalism was not built with the framework to understand and be comfortable with suffering. Fellowship with the sufferings of Christ has never been the focus of spiritual

formation as such an emphasis conflicts with the mission. Their house was built on the value of certitude, which produced the expectation of a wonderful fulfillment of God's plan that morphed into a theology that produces an obsession with growth and the prestige that a large church brings. However, the by-product has fostered a generally unhealthy worldview that values success while "the least of these" are often overlooked. Most evangelicals do not provide good answers that bring comfort to those who live in the experience of chronic pain. They do many things well, but they do not suffer well.

A Poor Stewardship of Power

The issue is not power, but motives that are self-serving and ultimately result in a misuse of power.²⁹ Church leaders can get lost spiritually in their own success, and the pressures of maintaining and increasing that success can tempt some to use their power inappropriately.

The misuse of power creates a mindset that becomes about controlling their environment. Marva Dawn observes, "too many Christians persist in using power. We try to control government policies . . . barrage with brilliance and wealth . . . [and] force Christianity on others and make them buy our values. We try to win the success race with other churches."³⁰ Dependency on our own abilities in the function of ministry encourages attitudes that ultimately become independent from God both collectively and individually, and a methodology is constructed to achieve success rather than submission to the voice of the Spirit. The adverse result of the misuse of power is that it always

²⁹ MaryKate Morse, *Making Room for Leadership: Power Space and Influence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 43.

³⁰ Marva J. Dawn, *Joy in Our Weakness* (Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 17.

generates opposition,³¹ which creates an atmosphere of tension both externally and internally.

God desires to use the methods of ministry as a tool to further grow us in the faith. This being the case, we need to allow room in our methodologies for dependency upon the Holy Spirit, which is evident, in part, in how we care for all of God's people. Good stewardship of power within the church is demonstrated by a leadership style that prioritizes service to people's needs rather than developing and maintaining goods and services designed to attract more people. This orientates our methodologies of ministry in caring for others, which teaches us humility for how we engage with others and with God. Do we possess the humility that allows God to intercede, being faithful to steward God's power? Do we set aside the impulse to use prevailing cultural methods of power to overcome or force change? The calling to carry our cross is a calling to demonstrate a lifestyle that is foreign to the prevailing cultures (both in and outside the church) and demonstrates the redemptive power of God.

The Book of Job: What Chronic Pain Sufferers Can Learn from Job's Experience

One can hardly address suffering in the Christian life without consulting the book of Job. This book is not an abstract treatise on evil and suffering, but a personal account of how Job, his family, and his friends dealt with suffering. It provides some general truths that are helpful in our own quest of trying to make sense of chronic pain suffering. This book serves as a template to address the complicated issue that bad things happen to

³¹ Ibid.

good people and these things often do not fit neatly into a construct of reaping and sowing.

Job became the object of Satan's challenge of God. Satan severely struck Job twice, through suffering the loss of his livestock, servants, and children. On Satan's second assault of Job, God granted permission to touch his body, but Satan could not take his life. Satan struck "Job with painful boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head" (Job 2:7). *The Lexham English Septuagint* describes the sores as "grievous."³² Job is in immense pain and uses a broken piece of pottery to attempt to clean his wounds and alleviate his discomfort.

Job's three friends arrive to console him and sit silently with him for seven days. When they finally speak, it is obvious that they have some relationship with God; much of their counsel coincides with biblical truths. They offer some advice based on the premise of reaping and sowing. Their hypothesis: Job has sinned and therefore he is experiencing the effects of sin in his life. Their advice is based on biblical principles,³³ but their assessment is not applicable in Job's life. It is common for chronic pain sufferers to be the recipient of unwise, inappropriate counsel. Job's friends would have been a comfort to him if they continued to sit silently rather than provide an analysis of Job's situation.

³² Rick Brannan et al., eds., *The Lexham English Septuagint* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012), Job 2:7–8.

³³ Ps. 34:11-22; Gal. 6:7; 1 Pet. 3:10.

Godly People Suffer

Job is described as righteous and blameless. The idea of blamelessness is taken from the Hebrew verb *tāmam*, a “fundamental idea of completeness.”³⁴ A derivative of this word is *tām*, which describes Job as blameless (Job 1:1). Job also claims that he is blameless (*tām*, Job 9:21), and, most importantly, God pronounces him blameless (Job 1:8, 2:3). Job is not self-deceived; he understands that he is not without sin, but that he is righteous in the eyes of God (Job 9:20). He says, “though I be perfect, it (marg., he) shall prove me perverse” (Job 9:20 ASV).

God Permits Suffering to Happen

Job is declared blameless by God, yet the Almighty gives Satan permission to harm him. He is not suffering from God’s judgment, chastening him to repentance. An important consideration in understanding this book: if Job is not blameless, then this story is pointless. What makes this story so important, and yet troublesome, is that Job is not suffering due to some evil thing he has done.

Francis Andersen observes that “there is no doubt that God is ultimately responsible for what happened to Job.”³⁵ This is an unsettling reality, yet God tells Satan that “you incited Me against him, to destroy him without cause” (Job 2:3 NKJV). The best that can be taken from this statement of God’s is to understand it as an adversarial comment by God to Satan and implies the Lord’s sovereignty in all matters.³⁶ Nothing

³⁴ R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. J. Barton Payne (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 973.

³⁵ Francis I. Andersen, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*, vol. 14, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 68.

³⁶ John Peter Lange et al., *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Job* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008), 301.

happens unless God permits it. Yet He is also consistent with his nature of holiness and “cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone” (James 1:13).

It can be difficult to comprehend, but those things that plague humanity are still under the control of God. The freedom given to evil forces to wreak havoc in people’s lives—including suffering due to chronic pain—is set in conflict with the truth that God’s love for us is also his concern for our welfare. For his own purposes, God permits unmeasurable leeway to both good and evil. In His rule, God contains darkness not by eliminating it, but by providing the grace to live—and thrive—in the midst of trials.

Can We Question God and Remain Blameless?

The answer to this lack of justice is that all things will be reconciled in the *eschaton*. But Job (Job 21), like many of us, does not want to wait. He wants his case to be heard and himself vindicated in the here and now. Job complains to God about his apparent injustice, yet God holds Job blameless in doing so. In what can only be described as a paradox, God allows us to contend with Him, even if it is (which is always the case) in our ignorance.

Social Suffering of Chronic Pain

Job’s wife also suffered the loss of her children, the threat to her livelihood, and seeing the pain Job endured physically. In her despair, she challenges Job to “curse God and die,” no doubt prompted by her own anger, confusion, and grief. Job responds by asking an important question that reveals his relationship with and respect for God. He has a holy fear. He responds to her challenge by asking “shall we indeed accept good from God, and shall we not accept adversity?” This question demonstrates Job’s incredible faith to accept all things from the hand of God. What cannot be overlooked in

Job's response is how he both cautions his wife not to be foolish and gives her a question from which to form a better understanding of their current situation. It is folly to cut off relationship with God while we are in the dark.

To add to his despair, Job must defend his innocence to his friends, who believe his suffering was due to some sin he had committed. His experience does not match their understanding of scripture, and they believe that the problem must lie with Job. This is common when a person has a good understanding of scripture without a strong ability to discern the things happening in front of them. Job has nothing to repent of and sinks into the depth of his sorrow. Eventually, God meets Him there. Job's counselors are without personal and spiritual insight into Job's situation and, as Job says, "Oh, that you would be silent, and it would be your wisdom!" What is lacking in these discourses between Job and his friends is their ability to see past the suffering and identify the goodness of God.

The Benefits of Suffering

If God is sovereign, the suffering that comes into people's lives is not a matter of random chance. The question of theodicy is not why does evil exist, but why does God permit evil to flourish? God is not the direct cause of physical illness or injury, but in Job's case, He gave Satan permission to afflict him. God's providence allows suffering to happen, and he looks to use these circumstances as a means for our formation in Christ. God is doing something in the life of that individual, things that we cannot identify, but we see the result of a person who is becoming more like Christ.

One of the purposes of the book of Job is to teach us how to engage with suffering, both our own and that of others. Most physical suffering brings with it an element of the unknown, and the pursuit of meaning evades our comprehension. God

does not always provide the answers we are looking for. In the end, the book of Job does not provide us with a process or methodology to help us endure of our suffering. Most of this book records the ongoing spiritual struggle that suffering brings. There is no solace for Job and he is faced with the ongoing struggle of defending himself to his friends, which acerbates his emotions and further prompts his complaints and laments to God.

It is necessary to acknowledge that “humankind’s self-serving judgment of what is good is an inadequate basis for judging the divine morality” (Job 38:1-6).³⁷ We simply are not qualified to discern the purposes, plans, and methods of God’s work in our individual lives. It is not that we should forego searching for answers, but we are called into a humility that recognizes our limitations in understanding the Infinite. The created order is conflicted; there is not always a consistent pattern by which we can comprehend or in which we can place our assurance. This is how we learn to walk by faith.

It is difficult for some people to apprehend that those things plaguing humanity are still under the control of God. The freedom given to evil to wreak havoc in people’s lives, including chronic pain suffering, finds a conflicting place where we are loved by God, who provides leeway to both good and evil. In His rule, God controls darkness, although He has not yet eradicated it. Job’s repentance (Job 42:6) is his recognition of God’s rule over all things, both good and evil, to accomplish His good pleasure and will. He has faith in the justice of God, who both restrains evil and permits a portion of freedom.³⁸

³⁷ Bruce K. Waltke and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 941, Kindle.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 944.

God responds by challenging Job's qualifications to ask God for an answer for allowing such suffering in Job's life. God does not give him a direct answer; conversely, he delivers a discourse of inquiries directed at Job, who is at a loss to give an answer. It is perplexing that God does not give Job an explanation, yet later he explains to Paul the reason why he received the thorn in the flesh (2 Cor. 12:9), which we will address later. To find a reason for individual suffering, the answer, if there is one to be had, is normally found in the individual, and, at times, revealed only to that individual.³⁹

What about degenerative physical conditions that cause pain? This is a difficult situation to navigate. Over time, our bodies begin to break down, and it creates chronic pain. Are these things directly from the hand of God or are they part of the natural order that God has established in the cosmos, which includes our human bodies? Ultimately, it is God who permits our suffering, in that He does not intercede in some form of prevention. What we do not know, however, is the degree to which God may in fact be intervening in our bodies in keeping them from experiencing severe pain or other complications. The farther we attempt to delve into finding the answers of God's sovereignty and how this attribute of God exists in conjunction with free will and the natural order of the cosmos, the less we can know for certain and must embrace the mystery of God's will, purpose, and power, trusting in His provision of relentless love for each of us.

Divine Healing

Pentecostal theology is a unique form of evangelicalism and can be generally described as a blend of modernism, with a focus on power and progress, and ancient

³⁹ Andersen, *Job*, 72.

mysticism, which seeks supernatural experiences through a move of the Holy Spirit. Within this context is the emphasis by some Pentecostals on divine healing, which is considered an expression of God's work in the "restoration of all things" (Acts 3:21).

The sin of Adam changed the entire cosmos, from humanity's relationship to God, to natural experiences such as the pain that women experience in childbirth, and how one must toil to produce food from the earth. Both the ground and the serpent were cursed, and Satan took dominion over the earth away from humanity. The fall also brought the affliction of sicknesses that lead to our eventual deaths. Illnesses and injuries bring chronic pain from which there is little relief. Illness is a result of original sin and its origins are in the kingdom of Satan.⁴⁰

Pain and physical suffering are something that Christ came to do away with. God can, and at times does, heal people through what has been called "divine healing." John Wimber, who led the Vineyard Association of Churches until his death in 1997, credits Linda Coleman with providing a good definition of divine healing. Wimber quotes Coleman's definition in his book *Power Healing* as those "cases in which God intervenes directly, bypassing the natural processes of the body and the skills of the doctors and nurses."⁴¹ In this section, we will give attention to the Pentecostal perspective on physical healing, both divine and natural.

Christians experience spiritual healing when they make a commitment to Christ. The work of atonement makes humanity completely whole. This atoning work of

⁴⁰ John Wimber with Kevin Springer, *Power Healing* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1987), 15.

⁴¹ Linda Coleman, "Christian Healing: Is it Real?" *Spiritual Counterfeits Project Journal* (August 1978), quoted in Wimber and Springer, *Power Healing*, 42.

wholeness also includes divine healing. Based on the atonement, divine healing is not outside the possibility for chronic pain sufferers. Sin (*harmartia*) is viewed by Eastern Orthodoxy as a break from the way things should be, both in the natural world and supernatural. The atonement provides healing that reestablishes our relationship with God in both the natural and supernatural worlds.⁴² Some Pentecostals hold to this view of sin and atonement. What does the Bible tell us about the work of the atonement on the cross?

Atonement in the Old Testament

As mentioned above, the foundational theological belief for the basis of divine physical healing among many Pentecostal groups is the view that healing is a part of the work of atonement. One of the primary passages in scripture that supports this view is taken from Isaiah 53. The fall of humanity brought the curse of sickness, illness, disease, and death. Christ's atoning work redeemed us from the curse of the law, and, as the prophet Isaiah prophesied, "He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows." The marginal notation in the *New King James Version* for Isaiah 53:4 is that the literal meaning of the word translated "griefs" is sicknesses, and "sorrows" is literally pains. The *Christian Standard Bible* translates this verse: "He Himself bore our sicknesses, and He carried our pains."⁴³ In verse 12, we are told that "he bore the sins of many." The word translated "bore" in verses 4 and 12c in the *Christian Standard Bible* is the Hebrew word *nasa*, which brings the idea of carrying something, especially to bear the guilt or punishment of sin. This interpretation is not isolated to Isaiah 53. The phrase "he shall

⁴² Daniel Hinshaw, *Suffering and the Nature of Healing* (Yonkers, NY: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2013), 58.

⁴³ *The Holy Bible: Holman Christian Standard Version* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2009), Is. 53:4.

bear (*nasa*) his iniquity” is used often in the Torah⁴⁴ as a statement that a person will suffer judgment from their own sin.⁴⁵ The Torah also uses *nasa* for the idea of bearing the guilt of others through representation or substitution, as depicted in the role of the scapegoat in the offering on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:22). In the way that sin is borne, either by the guilty party or by a substitute, our sicknesses and pains are being carried by Christ along with the guilt and punishment for our sins. How does Christ bear our sins? He does so substitutionally, in a vicarious fashion. He bears our sicknesses and injuries to the body in the same way.⁴⁶ There must be more to the work of the atonement—a work that is done in Christ’s physical body—than simply a healing spiritually.

Wayne Grudem points out that Isaiah’s prophetic description of Christ’s work of atonement not only involves spiritual healing in providing salvation through the removal of our sins, but the availability of healing from physical sickness and weaknesses. Grudem believes that the full realization of all the promises will not happen until Christ returns; however, there are times when God grants a “foretaste” of the future and the breaking in of the Kingdom of God upon this present darkness.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Lev. 5:1, 17; 7:18; Num. 5:31; 14:34. The Torah is the name given to the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, and literally means “the teaching.”

⁴⁵ Walter C. Kaiser, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 601.

⁴⁶ Guy P. Duffield and Nathaniel M. Van Cleave, *Foundations of Pentecostal Theology* (Los Angeles: Foursquare Media, 2008), 393-394.

⁴⁷ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 1063.

Atonement in the New Testament

Matthew cites the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 as fulfilled by Jesus' earthly healing ministry, and provides the backdrop from the Hebrew scripture to affirm Jesus' Messiahship. Matthew recognizes the earthly ministry of Jesus as efficacious, not only addressing our spiritual problems, but heals us physically and psychologically. Matthew 8:16-17 describes Jesus ministering to people as a fulfillment of Isaiah 53:4 by his work of casting out demons and healing "all who were sick."

Guy Duffield and Norman Van Cleave, coauthors of *Foundations of Pentecostal Theology*, interpret the dualistic elements of body and blood of Communion observance (they use the term The Lord's Supper) as representing the two aspects of humanity that are healed in the atoning work of the cross of Christ. The blood is shed for forgiveness of sin while the body broken is for "health and strength of our physical lives."⁴⁸ Perhaps this is overly symbolic. However, the church has some significantly different interpretations of what the elements of Communion (bread and wine) either represent or consist of. This interpretation of what the bread and wine represent could indicate another layer of understanding that we should consider when we come to the table and dine with Christ, partaking of His blood and body.

What Is the Cause of Our Physical Suffering?

There are several examples of God allowing Satan to bring sickness and physical suffering into the bodies of people. As mentioned above, God permitted Satan to strike Job with painful boils all over his body (Job 2:7). The gospel of Luke describes a woman who had been bent over for 18 years, citing the cause of her condition as being bound by

⁴⁸ Duffield and Van Cleave, *Foundations of Pentecostal Theology*, 395.

Satan (Luke 13:16). In Peter's sermon at the house of Cornelius, he describes the ministry of Jesus as "healing all who were oppressed by the devil" (Acts 10:38). Paul's thorn in the flesh, which we will address in detail later, was caused by a "messenger of Satan" (2 Cor. 12:7). In each of these four biblical narratives, the struggle between humanity and the forces of darkness is described. Illness and physical suffering, including chronic pain, can be manifestations of Satan's domain and influence on a person's life.

Your Kingdom Come

The Bible has many stories that tell us of the supernatural power of God to physically heal those with chronic illnesses. We see this in the gospel narratives and such healings are linked with the advancement of the Kingdom of God. Randy Clark, a former Vineyard pastor who describes himself as an "international itinerant minister," defines the release of the gifts of the Spirit as the blessings of God's power to help us in life. Clark is very familiar with spiritual manifestations; among his credits, he was the catalyst for the Toronto Blessing, which he claims as the longest protracted meeting in North American history, lasting twelve and a half years, six nights a week.⁴⁹ He interprets spiritual manifestations, including divine healing, as signs of the in-breaking of God's Kingdom, and they "help us to establish his domain by pushing back the powers of darkness, sickness and demonic."⁵⁰

⁴⁹ "Founder, Apostle, Imparter, Randy Clark," Global Awakening, accessed December 3, 2018, <https://globalawakening.com/about-randy-clark?highlight=WyJyYW5keSIsInJhbmR5J3MiLCJjbGFyayIsImNsYXJrJ3MiLCJjbGFyaycuXHUyMDFkIiwicmFuZkY2xhcmsiXQ==>.

⁵⁰ Bill Johnson and Randy Clark, *The Essential Guide to Healing Equipping all Christians to Pray for the Sick* (Bloomington, MN: Chosen Books, 2011), 57. The theology of spiritual warfare for Clark is understanding that there are times when demons afflict human bodies with infirmities.

Bethel Church in Redding, California has established itself as a place of supernatural ministry, including a strong emphasis on physical healing. This church is well-known internationally for its activity in the realm of God's supernatural manifestations, and is controversial among some groups within the church. The church has a school of supernatural ministry and a healing room that is open to those who are suffering physically to receive prayer in hope that they will be supernaturally healed. The Healing Room is where they seek the Holy Spirit and his healing power in a special time of ministry.⁵¹ Bethel's theology echoes Clark's views that healing ministry is a part of the advancement of the Kingdom of God and is considered a part of spiritual warfare.

Bill Johnson, senior leader of Bethel Church, teaches that healing is a part of the larger work of salvation. Referring to Luke 9:56 (NKJV), "the Son of man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them," Johnson points out that the word translated "save" is the word *sozo* in the Greek, which refers to healing from sin, healing from disease, and deliverance from torment. He believes that our salvation is a work of Christ that addresses the needs of body, soul, and spirit. Johnson writes, "freedom from disease is God's will on earth. Period."⁵² The work of salvation is intended to be comprehensive to the whole person; our bodies and souls are healed from the effects of sin. Johnson's view of sin and healing sounds similar to the Eastern Orthodox view (as noted above and expanded later) that sin (*hamartia*) needs a holistic healing of the body and the soul to experience full restoration.⁵³

⁵¹ "Healing Rooms," Bethel Redding, accessed November 10, 2017, <http://bethelredding.com/content/healing-rooms>.

⁵² Johnson and Clark, *The Essential Guide to Healing*, 119-120.

⁵³ Hinshaw, *Suffering and the Nature of Healing*, 56.

Johnson and other Pentecostal leaders draw biblical support for divine healing from the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray: “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). We take steps toward greater wholeness of body and soul when “heaven invades earth.” Johnson believes that every time a person becomes a Christian, is physically healed, or receives some type of deliverance, a piece of heaven has come to earth to push back the work of the devil. This is spiritual warfare where the battle lines are not only people’s souls, but also their bodies and minds.

John Wimber claims that Jesus’ work of healing is always accompanied with the proclamation of the Kingdom of God. The healings in the New Testament were based on the compassion of Christ and his mercy upon those who suffered (Mark 6:34). Wimber says that “in the New Testament, sickness is seen as an extension and effect of sin and is therefore evil in origin, representing the kingdom of Satan.”⁵⁴ The work of divine healing is just one area where the Kingdom of God is advancing.

Wimber believes that illness is suffering that will be eliminated as we hope for the Kingdom to come in its fullness as we enter a new age of Christ’s reign (Rev. 21:4). While speaking at a Signs and Wonders Conference, Wimber takes strong issue with the idea that sickness is “the will of God” or other “trite comments” intended to comfort people in pain. Wimber considers “these platitudes, uttered usually with sonorous religious tones, [as] an abomination to a God of mercy and love.”⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Wimber and Springer, *Power Healing*, 36.

⁵⁵ “In 1985, John Wimber Called Out This Lie Today's Christians Still Fall For,” *Charisma Magazine*, July 20, 2018, YouTube video, 3:24, <https://www.charismamag.com/video/37738-in-1985-john-wimber-called-out-this-lie-today-s-christians-still-fall-for>.

Healing the Whole Person

Healing extends beyond our physical bodies. Wimber sees healing taking place in the realms of the spiritual, emotional, and physical.⁵⁶ Kris Vallotton, a senior leader of Bethel Church, agrees that divine healing is intended to penetrate in these three realms of our being. He uses the story of the man lame from birth who begged at the gate called Beautiful as biblical support for this doctrine (Acts 3:1-10). Peter sees this man begging as he is walking in to prayer and heals him in the name of Jesus. This man responds by “walking, leaping, and praising God” (Acts 3:8). Vallotton’s interpretation is that walking is the manifestation of being healed physically, leaping is the expression of his emotional healing, and his praising God represents spiritual healing. In this case, the work of healing is progressive. The man is healed, which gives him the emotion of joy, and then he expresses thankfulness to God in worship. Both Wimber and Vallotton affirm that emotional healing is necessary for wholeness and long-term well-being. Spiritual healing is something beyond salvation and often addresses unconfessed sin in a person’s life that, if not repented of, brings destructive emotional thoughts and behaviors. When our minds dwell on bad thoughts, our emotions are affected and can either create a physical sickness or weaken our souls and render us unable to cope well with chronic pain.

One characteristic prevalent in Pentecostal settings is the attention given to and dependency on the work of the Holy Spirit as he operates through spiritual gifts. In the case of divine healings, healing practitioners who minister in public meetings often receive a word of knowledge from the Holy Spirit. Randy Clark claims that he receives words of knowledge about the spiritual and physical conditions of people who will later be in the audiences that he ministers to, so much so that he spends time before church

⁵⁶ Wimber and Springer, *Power Healing*, 61-62.

services listening to the Spirit and writing down what he hears.⁵⁷ It is through a word of knowledge that the Spirit alerts Randy that someone needs prayer and healing.

Clark describes three different ways someone might receive a word of knowledge in a healing context. The three means of communication are feeling, seeing, and thinking.⁵⁸ The Spirit can communicate to the healer through feelings in their physical bodies, causing them to feel pain in a distinct place in their body. This alerts them that God desires to heal someone who has pain in that particular part of their body. The healer may also have some type of vision that would allow them to “see” a situation or person who needs healing. Or the Spirit might interject thoughts into the healer while they are in prayer that help identify a person whom God desires to heal. Clark cautions us to be alert for words of knowledge that come in these three different ways and to be as specific as possible when describing them to the congregation, being careful to not interject our own interpretation of these messages, but rather, simply revealing what the Lord has communicated.⁵⁹

Medical Healing from a Pentecostal Perspective

Pentecostals recognize that there are two streams of healing: supernatural, divine healing and medical science. Is there a contradiction between the two streams of healing? To better understand this relationship between divine and medical healing, I attended The Medical Healing Conference at Bethel Church in Redding, California in May 2017. Most of the attendees were medical professionals.

⁵⁷ Johnson and Clark, *The Essential Guide to Healing*, 191-192.

⁵⁸ Wimber and Springer, *Power Healing*, 194.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 195.

The message repeated throughout the conference was that medical healing was not a “second-class healing.” While the conference was promoted to encourage medical professionals to meet others who were like-minded and wanting to see “the natural and supernatural gifts of healing combine,”⁶⁰ most of the teaching sessions were centered on the topic of divine healing. There was a ministry time where medical professionals could have their hands anointed, where others would pray a blessing on their healing ministry.

Bill Johnson taught from Malachi 4:2, referring to the Sun of Righteousness arising with healing in His wings, a Messianic reference that would best fit Jesus’ second coming. Johnson’s hermeneutic is dependent on the use of symbolism. He used this text as a springboard into physical healing, emphasizing the necessity of learning how God operates and the methods of how He instructs His people. He points out that the children of Israel were trained in the wilderness to live under supernatural means. Because of how God operated then, the presumption is that the Promised Land would be a land of supernatural provision and miracles, but that was not the case. One example of these miracles is the manna that was given to the children of Israel in the wilderness. The children of Israel were dependent upon God for their provision throughout their forty-year wilderness wanderings, yet once they enter the Promised Land, the manna was no longer provided. Instead, they are told by God to plant crops. Johnson believes that the Lord trains us to be good stewards of the natural realm by our exposure to the supernatural.

⁶⁰ “Bethel Medical Healing Conference, 2017,” Global Legacy Healthcare Network, accessed October 5, 2018, <https://healthcare.globallegacy.com/events/bethel-medical-healing-conference-2017>.

Preparing the Vessel

Johnson seeks to erase the line between natural and supernatural. He says, “we think of God’s acting as supernatural. God only has one. It’s called natural. No matter what means that God uses, the source is always Him.”⁶¹ He also points out that the line between secular and sacred is a false dichotomy. Every believer is a priest, and whatever they do is holy, not secular. The Lord uses natural gifts and skills—including medical science—that He empowers, which as Johnson believes “changes everything.”⁶²

Johnson believes that the measure for which God can entrust His work to us depends on how well-developed we are spiritually. The emphasis is on personal spiritual development, in that God prepares his vessels before using them. Johnson tells us that in order for God to work “consistently beyond the reach of our prayers and imagination, he must do a deep work in us.”⁶³ God’s preparation is needed because the supernatural is not a place for the novice.

However, Johnson defines “a deep work” of God as unorthodox, strange, supernatural experiences that changed him from the inside out. He describes times in his life when he was pleading with God for more of Him and more of His power. One time of pursuing the power of God culminated in esoteric experiences where Johnson woke up at 3am and felt like “thousands of volts” were pulsating through his body, rendering him unable to move. Johnson described the experience as “glorious, but not pleasant.”⁶⁴ He

⁶¹ Bill Johnson, “Can Faith and Medicine Co-Exist?” (lecture, Medical Healing Conference, Bethel Church, Redding, CA, May 5, 2017).

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Johnson and Clark, *The Essential Guide to Healing*, 49.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 46-47.

interprets this and other similar experiences as the power of God entering him until he “got it,” that is, receiving an impartation of power to work the supernatural works of God.⁶⁵ Wimber and Clark also believe in this principle and emphasize that being used greatly by God will require great personal sacrifice. While not questioning any of these men’s devotional lives, it is of interest that in the preparation phase they described, there was no reference to spiritual disciplines.

Wimber describes his process of becoming a usable vessel for God’s supernatural work as characterized by humiliating experiences that he later realized was intended to break and humble him. After being convinced that God told him to teach on healing, he provided altar calls at the end of his sermons where he inviting people to “come forward” for healing. Wimber said that he went 10 months praying for the sick without seeing anyone healed. It was a humiliating process where he was humbled and yet he remained obedient to what he believed God called him to do.⁶⁶

The Problem of a Fallen World

Kris Vallotton claims that hundreds of people get healed at Bethel Church each week—some of them have verifiable healings—only to die later of the same disease. In his words, “they obtain things that they cannot sustain.”⁶⁷ He is suggesting that there are different reasons why a healing does not last. Some people are not good stewards of their healing; they don’t change to a healthier lifestyle physically, emotionally, or spiritually. There is also the possibility of a sickness returning, part of the struggle of living in a

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Wimber and Springer, *Power Healing*, 50.

⁶⁷ Kris Vallotton, “Living in Wholeness” (lecture, Medical Healing Conference, Bethel Church, Redding, CA, May 4, 2017).

fallen world. A member of a local Christian motorcycle club was diagnosed with stage four cancer. He traveled to Bethel and was supposedly healed; whether his healing was verified by a physician is unclear. He apparently resumed an active lifestyle, enjoying his healing and being a testimony of the power of God. Unfortunately, he died about 15 months after his visit to Bethel Church.

Problems with this Practice

While the above-mentioned pastors all admit that not everyone receives physical healing in this life, they offer a list of reasons why a person does not receive deliverance. Some reasons given for why a person does not receive divine healing are: God's sovereign purpose in the suffering, unconfessed sin, emotional hurts that have been allowed to continue rather than relinquished, or the stronghold of the enemy over a person suffering. The insight as to why an individual is not healed is claimed to be given through another word of knowledge. However, there is the possibility that the word of knowledge that the healer heard was not a word from the Lord at all, but a product of their own imagination. Such mistakes can be devastating to someone spiritually.

Pentecostalism is perceived by some Christians as highly subjective and strange. It is not uncommon for their doctrines to extend beyond what most of the more conservative evangelicals (Baptist, Calvary Chapel, Brethren, Evangelical Free, Reformed, and other non-denominational groups) consider to be the boundaries of scripture. These conservative groups often reject experience as a means of establishing doctrine; however, for many Pentecostals, experience is another hermeneutical lens through which to comprehend the movements of the Holy Spirit. The construction of this theology requires a highly subjective hermeneutic that blends allegorized interpretation of

the Bible and personal experience of encountering God's supernatural power. There is therefore concern that such activity can open the door for the counterfeit, initiated either by humans or demonic spirits.

While Pentecostal theology can be highly subjective and even mystical, it focuses on spiritual warfare and experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit, which would include physical, emotional and spiritual healing. However, not everyone who seeks healing receives it, which opens ministers up to be the object of criticism and ridicule. People who are firmly entrenched in modernism don't do well with this form of subjectivism, and the more mystical Catholic can be repelled by the strong claims of spiritual power rather than a quiet submission to God's providence, including chronic pain.

It is possible that God heals supernaturally; however, divine healing does not appear normative in the Christian experience. Nor does healing require the sensationalistic approach that some of these ministers seem to gravitate toward. Healing can take place in the assembly of people and through the quiet, unnoticed prayers of his people.

The Lord says in Jeremiah 15:19, "If you take out the precious from the vile, you shall be as My mouth." May God grant the grace to discern the move of the Spirit from the counterfeits, being able to separate the wheat from the chaff.

Eastern Orthodoxy

While there are some striking similarities, Eastern Orthodoxy takes a very different approach from the Pentecostal view of human suffering. Under this system, it is very important for the chronic pain sufferer to address their doubts, complaints, and sense of injustice that they feel in having experienced their physical difficulties. God is bigger

than our doubts and stronger than our faith (or lack of it). Eastern Orthodox doctrine has a holistic understanding of our humanity, in part, because they have not embraced many of the tenants of modernism as have been widely accepted in the West. Eastern thought recognizes that there is more to life than survival and success; there is the nurturing and growth of our souls and the value that suffering brings into our lives.

It is a common reaction in the initial face of some physical tragedy to oneself or a loved one to wonder where God is and why he permits such things into our lives. Such questions appear to skirt the edge of blasphemy, but they are honest questions of people who are attempting to live by faith and whose understanding of a good God has been challenged. This is an uncomfortable place for most evangelicals, but the raw honesty of such questions, as were asked in the book of Job, is a means by which we can reflect on our own relationship with God and explore the inexhaustible deeps of His nature and love. Is it possible that when we resist the suffering in our lives that we are exposing our belief in a God that does not exist? In doing so, we obscure the vision of the truth of God “whom we need to discover, as He is, and not as we want Him to be.”⁶⁸

Physical suffering can be a means to connect us mystically in communion with God.⁶⁹ There is something indescribable that happens when we offer our weakness to God so that he becomes our focus rather than our pain. God chooses those who are “weak and despised by the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are” (1 Cor. 1:27, 28). Paul understood that it was in his own weakness that he was strong. “The foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than

⁶⁸ Metropolitan Nikolaos, *When God is Not There* (Montreal: Alexander Press, 2014), 16-17.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

men” (1 Cor. 1:25). His strength and wisdom can be displayed in the life of those who suffer chronic pain.

The presence of a person with chronic pain can bring discomfort and pain to others, but they can also bring the presence of grace to our suffering world. “Above all, it gives us an inkling of the true God—who is a good deal different from the human one we imagine, who naturally does not exist.”⁷⁰ It is part of God’s purpose to demonstrate the reality of who he is in the suffering of his people. Much of the Eastern Orthodox method is to learn to endure chronic physical conditions, and to emphasize the necessity of nurturing our souls to grow in their relationship to God. They have learned to endure suffering as Christ suffered for us. “Many of the saints speak about the positive way in living through trials, sorrow and difficulties in such a way that they are defiant to their situations.”⁷¹ Isaac the Syrian refers to the process of suffering as God’s way of perfecting our souls, and gives “glory to the Master who brings us the delight of health through bitter medicines.”⁷² Isaac calls those bitter medicines the delight of spiritual life.

How should we respond when life is tragic? The deeper the emotions, the greater the wound inflicted by pain. The “why” questions themselves can be tortuous. Unlike Bill Johnson’s position of not asking why, Eastern Orthodoxy delves into these mysteries, and it is often not so much to find the answers as it is to have a better view of God. As Metropolitan Nikolaos says, there are “blessed why questions,” modeled after Christ Himself when He asked “My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?” (Mark

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 62.

⁷² Isaac the Syrian, *Ascetic Homilies*, 48, quoted in Nikolaos, *When God Is Not There*, 62.

15:34).⁷³ This is an important characteristic in our formation. We ask the difficult questions of God, and his answer is often given in a deeper revelation of who He is.

We all experience suffering to some degree and all of us will one day experience death. These are mysteries for which there are no answers. As we seek to understand either our own suffering or the pain of others, “truth is not expressed as an opinion or an argument, but offered as humility and shared suffering.”⁷⁴ There is a strong sense of sharing in his sufferings if we open ourselves toward such communion with Christ (Phil. 3:10). It is through this deeper communion that our suffering gives rise to a greater sensitivity in the things of the Spirit and the ability to see realities which cannot otherwise be seen. The challenge is for us to have that sense of surrendering ourselves to God to receive all that He has for us.

Pain and injustice cannot abolish God’s love. “The greatest miracle of His existence is that He co-exists with pain, injustice and death.”⁷⁵ The greatest challenge we have is to believe and claim these truths in midst of chronic pain, to hold on to the deeper “why” questions in hope, and to humbly abandon ourselves into the hands of God precisely through the “injustices” we believe He does to us. “Though he slay me, yet will I trust Him” (Job 13:15). Everyone eventually decides for themselves how the tragedies of life affect our spirituality and relationship with God.

⁷³ Nikolaos, *When God Is Not There*, 77-78.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 84.

SECTION 3: STRENGTH THROUGH WEAKNESS

Biblical narratives of suffering provide examples for how we should respond to suffering, including chronic physical pain. One of the strongest examples we have is Paul's resolve to continue the mission of the Kingdom of God in the face of his physical suffering. In 2 Corinthians, Paul writes on the theme of suffering and the faithfulness of God who brings comfort to us during affliction. He brings his personal experiences to light as examples of enduring afflictions through receiving God's grace and comfort. Paul endured many spiritual battles and physical persecutions, along with dangerous situations and his concern for the churches (2 Cor. 11:22-28). Despite all that Paul suffered, he never lost sight of completing his calling.

Paul writes briefly in identifying many of his suffering experiences (2 Cor. 11:21-33). Of interest for this paper is that he spends considerable time unpacking what he refers to as "a thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12; see also Gal. 4:14). While Paul found his thorn in the flesh painful and limiting, he recognized the value of his suffering in that it provided spiritual balance in his life. In commenting on Paul's thorn in the flesh, J. I. Packer observes, "we should recognize that the fierce and somewhat disabling pain with which Christ in due course required him to love, and that he clearly accepted as a weakness that would be with him to his dying day, had in view less the enriching of his ministry than the furthering of his sanctification."⁷⁶ Packer touches on an important concept in the Christian life. It is more important what we become before God than what

⁷⁶ J. I. Packer, *Weakness Is the Way: Life with Christ Our Strength* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 52.

we do for him. While the world—including much of evangelicalism—is obsessed with activity, God is calling us aside from the busyness of life and the drive to be productive to quiet our soul and be transformed by him.

At times, God permits people to suffer, using those circumstances to develop their spiritual lives. It is not unusual that part of our spiritual formation process will sometimes involve some type of suffering that helps us to know God deeply and be conformed into his likeness. Not every Christian will experience chronic pain, yet it is not uncommon that as people age, they will experience an illness or injury that makes them more susceptible to suffer. This does not mean that chronic pain sufferers are sinful or hardhearted and require austere conditions to accommodate or force their transformation. The things God permits in our lives and his reasons behind doing so, can be mysterious and beyond our understanding. While that thorn for Paul was tragic, he understands that it was God's purpose to further his spiritual formation.

The Priority of Worship

In 2 Corinthians 1, Paul greets his audience and pronounces a blessing upon “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” His blessing is the recognition of God's goodness as the “Father of mercies and God of all comfort” (2 Cor. 1:3). Worship is the recognition of God's attributes and our response to his demonstration of grace. Moses encouraged the Israelites to worship God by giving “greatness to our God. He is the Rock, His work *is* perfect; For all His ways *are* justice, A God of truth and without injustice; Righteous and upright *is* He” (Deut. 32:3-4).⁷⁷ This expression of worship that

⁷⁷ The Song of Moses is in the context of the law being given to Israel a second time. The proceedings and song in this text also have a legal context and that Moses is acting as a character witness for God.

proclaims the perfection and justice of God may certainly be a challenge for chronic pain sufferers; what is needful is opening our understanding to the goodness of God even in the midst of suffering, so that we might be able to worship him with our mind, heart, and soul. It is in the context of worship that we often receive from him spiritual blessings that sustain us. God is the source of compassion, which he gives to all. Paul begins this letter with an expression of worship, which he is only able to do because of his experience of God's comfort through hardship and suffering. Such a heart of worship is forged in the fires of affliction, encountering God's comforting presence and his provision, which is then given through ministry to others.

God's Comfort

In the opening doxology of 2 Corinthians, the Greek word group *parakeleo-paraklesis* is used ten times and is translated in the New King James Version (NKJV) as either "comfort" or "comforted." *Parakeleo* is defined by the exhaustive work *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* as "instill[ing] someone with courage or cheer, comfort, encourage, cheer up, lifting of another's spirits, comfort, consolation."⁷⁸ The idea of comfort in affliction is the dominant theme in 2 Corinthians 1:3-7 and it establishes a main theme of this letter.

Murray Harris writes that the New Testament usage of the word group *parakeleo* has three main meanings: encouragement/exhortation, appeal/request, and

⁷⁸ William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 765-766. This work is better known in ministerial circles as the BDAG.

comfort/consolation.⁷⁹ All three of these meanings are communicated in 2 Corinthians. The word group carries the meaning of a request; that is, asking someone to come be present where the speaker is, of being called to one's side.⁸⁰ Whether Paul received God's comfort through other people or if his consolation was something he received directly from the Lord is not clear (2 Cor. 1:4). What is clear in these opening verses of 2 Corinthians is that the ultimate source of comfort is God. 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 tells us that he is the "God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." This common experience between Paul and the Corinthian church is the bond where they enter into the fellowship of suffering together, which "becomes a fellowship of comfort, and both in rich measure" (2 Cor. 1:5-7).⁸¹ Shared experiences, such as short-term mission trips, bring people closer to each other, but there is no deeper camaraderie than a communion of suffering. This shared experience is present within the church at Corinth, but, more importantly, it is also with God as the "sufferings of Christ abound" in them (2 Cor. 1:5). Christ desires that we share in his sufferings, which is manifested in our bodies.

Physical Suffering Has a Purpose

In writing this letter, Paul seeks to reestablish his place of influence with the Corinthians, who had been listening to rival teachers' contrary doctrines (2 Cor. 11:1-4;

⁷⁹ Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 143.

⁸⁰ Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 764.

⁸¹ Otto Schmitz, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 797-798.

13-15). In part of his defense of his apostolic office, Paul tells them of a special revelation he experienced (2 Cor. 12:1-4), but he quickly admits that any boasting on his part should be in reference to the power of Christ dwelling in him. This power, he says, is contrary to his weakness brought on by his physical suffering, which he refers to as a “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor. 12:7-10).

Paul’s acknowledgment of the thorn in the flesh being a part of God’s sovereign purpose for his life attests to his humility and submission to the Lord. The thorn in the flesh (*sarx*) was probably a physical issue, which may have also had psychological effects. The Greek word *sarx* is translated “flesh,” but could also mean “a human being or a person.”⁸² This broader meaning of the word *sarx* could suggest a psychological component along with physical suffering where Paul was being tormented by a messenger of Satan. As zealous as Paul was for furthering the gospel, he may have experienced some depression when he felt that his physical issues prevented him from reaching what he believed to be his full potential in serving Christ. Aside from any psychological suffering, it appears that the thorn in the flesh was something that caused Paul a great deal of physical pain.

Paul was a chronic pain sufferer.

Murray Harris gives us a list of what we can understand about the thorn in the flesh from 2 Corinthians 12:7-10:

1. The thorn was given due to the revelations Paul received in paradise (v. 7).
2. The thorn caused great pain either physically, psychologically or both, and caused him to pray for its removal (vv. 7–8).
3. He considered the thorn as concurrently a gift from God and an instrument of Satan (v. 7).

⁸² Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 93.

4. The thorn was a permanent condition (v. 7), that God did not remove (vv. 8–9).
5. The thorn was humbling and prevent Paul from being prideful.
6. It was humiliating. The word “buffet” (Greek – *kolaphizo*) means to strike with the fist and is a verbal form of the noun which means to cuff (strike) the ear (v. 7).
7. It caused Paul to feel weak (vv. 9–10), yet the weakness was an object of boasting (v. 9; cf. v. 5) and a source of pleasure (v. 10).⁸³

Many of these characteristics are common things that chronic pain brings into a person’s life. If the physical pain is not enough, there is the spiritual disappointment of praying for healing and not receiving deliverance. There are also the humbling experiences of people who either attend to the needs of a chronic pain patient or compensate their activities to allow for inclusion.

Evil for Good

The thorn in the flesh that Paul experienced was an instrument of a messenger of Satan that God permitted and used for his purposes in Paul’s life. At times, God will permits evil to work in the lives of His people in such a way that his will is accomplished. One example of this is the life of Joseph. God allowed him to be sold into slavery by his brothers, which, through the course of events, brought him to Egypt. He was sold to Potiphar and prospered in his house until he was falsely accused and imprisoned. Despite being in prison, Joseph prospered in that environment. His gift of interpreting dreams brought him into the service of Pharaoh, who made him second in command of Egypt with special authority to prepare for the coming famine. God used Joseph’s position of power to preserve the family of Israel during a time of famine. After the death of their father Israel, Joseph’s brothers feared he would use his authority to take revenge on them. Joseph, however, recognized God’s sovereign hand, telling his brothers that what they

⁸³ Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 857.

did was “evil against him, but God meant it for good.”⁸⁴ Joseph understood that God orchestrated the events in his life to place him in a position to preserve Israel’s family.

It is a paradox, yet God’s sanctifying, formative work in the lives of His people might include suffering to accomplish a greater spiritual purpose. Many Christians understand how God uses suffering and trials, but the expectation is that they happen to other people; it can be shocking to experience these things personally. This is contrary to the way that we normally envision personal growth, whether it be spiritually, intellectually, mentally, or emotionally. We rarely respond to anything quite so completely as we do suffering, as it brings an awareness of our weakness and forces us to seek out God’s strength. In the process of seeking out a solution to our ills, we find that God meets us in our despair and provides His grace. As Paul affirms, it is “through many tribulations [we] enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).

Our Weakness, God’s Power

Paul’s writing in 2 Corinthians 12 addresses the power of God in comparison with human weakness. How do these two attributes coexist? The word translated weakness (*astheneia*) is used twenty-four times in the New Testament. Nine times it is used to describe a physical illness; the other fifteen times it is used in a general sense that describes either personal weakness or that of the human condition. In 2 Corinthians 12:9, the weakness is a result of the thorn in the flesh Paul experienced. No doubt it reduced Paul’s effectiveness, at least in his own estimation. The thorn was something that caused him pain, whether physical, psychological, or spiritual; most likely it was a combination

⁸⁴ Genesis 50:20. Years after being sold into slavery by his brothers, Joseph had become second in command in Egypt. A severe famine had forced the relocation of his family to Egypt, where Joseph’s father Israel passed away. His brothers were then afraid that Joseph would take vengeance on them.

of all three. He prayed three times for the thorn to be removed. The thorn in the flesh was a result of a messenger of Satan used to beat (the NASB translates “torment”) Paul as a prevention from becoming overly self-exalted. The Greek word that is translated by the phrase “I should be exalted above measure” (2 Cor. 12:7, NKJV) is *hyperairomai*, which brings the meaning of being overly prideful with the implication of ridiculing or demeaning others.⁸⁵ This is the same word used in 2 Thessalonians 2:4 to describe the “son of perdition” exalting himself in the temple of God. It was through the thorn that Satan’s messenger not only physically afflicted Paul, but ridiculed him as well.

The paradox of this thorn is striking. Paul tells us that it was given to him (the implication is given by God), yet he recognized the agent involved in causing his suffering was a messenger of Satan. The word ‘given’ (*didomi*) in 2 Corinthians 12:7 can have as part of its meaning “to cause something to happen, to entrust something to another.”⁸⁶ Could it be that God entrusted Paul with such a trial, including his ability to stand firm in the torment by Satan’s messenger? Vincent describes the use of the word “messenger” in 2 Corinthians 12 as “figurative, in the sense of an agent. Satan is described in the New Testament as the originator of bodily evil. Thus, in the gospel narrative, demoniac possession is often accompanied with some form of disease (compare Luke 13:16; Acts 10:38, and see on 1 Cor. 5:5).”⁸⁷ Jesus’ commissioning of the twelve apostles and His later commissioning of the seventy included the charge and authority to heal the sick and have “authority over all demons” (Luke 9:1; 10:9, 18-19).

⁸⁵ Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 764.

⁸⁶ Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 242.

⁸⁷ Marvin Richardson Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, vol. 3 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1887), 355.

After Paul's third prayer for the thorn to be removed, the Lord gave him the answer: "my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9, ESV). Second Corinthians 12:9 is an important verse in addressing human capacity for spiritual formation and also having spiritual power in performing the ministries we have been called to. This verse has different interpretations because there are differences in some Greek manuscripts. Some manuscripts contain the phrase "my power is made perfect in weakness," while others omit the word "my" (Greek: *ego*) and is read "strength is made perfect in weakness." The absence of the word "my" in some manuscripts opens the possibility of interpreting this verse differently by presenting the question—whose power is Christ talking about? Is Christ referring to his power being made perfect in Paul's weakness—which appears to be the majority view—or is he making a generalized statement that "power is made perfect in weakness" (NRSV)? *The Lexham Textual Notes on the Bible* states that "many early manuscripts have 'the power,' but some other early manuscripts and related later witnesses have 'my power.'"⁸⁸ Marvin Vincent believes that "the best texts omit 'my,' thus turning the answer into a general proposition: strength is perfected in weakness."⁸⁹ Marva Dawn, in her exegetical work on this verse, believes the strength named here is not Christ's but Paul's.⁹⁰ To understand the significance of this view, we must continue with exegeting the verse.

⁸⁸ Rick Brannan and Israel Loken, *The Lexham Textual Notes on the Bible*, Lexham Bible Reference Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014), 2 Cor. 12:9.

⁸⁹ Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, 356.

⁹⁰ Marva Dawn, *Powers, Weakness and the Tabernacling of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), 38.

Secondly, there is the question of the translation of the word *teleo* in 2 Corinthians 12:9. Most English translations use the word *teleo* in 2 Corinthians 12:9 as “perfect.” However, Marva Dawn points out that the translation of the word *teleo* in other verses in the New Testament is something other than “perfect.” In her study of the word *teleo* (translated “is made perfect” in the ESV translation of 2 Cor. 12:9), she found that the other 27 verses in the New Testament consistently translated *teleo* as something that was completed or finished rather than perfected. This leads her to conclude that the phrase “to finish” rather than “is made perfect” would be more consistent with other passages of the English translation.⁹¹ She points out that the translation of *teleo* in 2 Corinthians 12:9 “as power is made perfect in weakness” (NRSV) is out of place with the rest of the NRSV’s translation of *teleo* and suggests that this verse be translated as “for power is brought to its end in weakness.”⁹² *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* provides some level of support for her argument in describing the “dynamic character of the Greek words *télos* and *teléō* in the New Testament as indicating a sense of fulfilment (cf. Lk. 22:37).”⁹³ This seems like a good translation if the power that is referred to here is Paul’s rather than Jesus’. Marva Dawn takes the view that the text says, “for [your] power [Paul’s] is brought to its end in weakness.”⁹⁴

⁹¹ Dawn, *Weakness*, 39-40. Marva used the NRSV in this illustration. Of note, there was not any documentation in her book that designated any version as primary for her book, and there were times that she used different versions.

⁹² Dawn, *Powers, Weakness*, 44.

⁹³ Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1985), 1161.

⁹⁴ Dawn, *Powers, Weakness*, 41.

Why is this distinction important? Marva Dawn interprets this as “Paul’s power being brought to an end in his weakness, it is through our weakness that Christ is able to reveal His presence.”⁹⁵ Without recognizing and embracing our own weakness, “our power becomes rival to God’s” and only through union with Christ and the power of the Spirit in our weaknesses can we experience and display His glory.⁹⁶ Dawn is correct in asserting that our own sense of power is contrary to how God wants to work in our lives.

Paul continues his thought in verse 9. “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me (ESV).” Paul is saying that either: (1) his power finds an end in his weakness, or, (2) Christ’s power is perfected in his weakness, and he can boast in the power of Christ that rests upon him. Either way, in weakness, we come to the end of ourselves so that the power of God may rest upon us. The Greek verb translated “may rest” is the word *episkenoō*, found only here in the New Testament. According to Vincent, this is a compound verb that “means to fix a tent or a habitation upon; and the figure is that of Christ abiding as a tent spread over him [Paul].”⁹⁷

This passage undergirds the idea that Christ’s power rests upon us when we come to the end of our strength, and recognize His power is made perfect only as we recognize our weakness. Chronic pain is a means where a person is confronted with their weakness, and with it comes the opportunity to have the power of God cover over them like an

⁹⁵ Ibid., 44.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 47.

⁹⁷ Marvin Richardson Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, vol. 3 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1887), 356.

umbrella protects from the rain. It is the power of God that dwells upon us by His grace, providing the strength to cope with the difficulties of daily chronic pain.

In 2 Corinthians 11:30-13:11, Paul uses a form of the Greek word *astheneia* six times, which is translated in the NKJV as either “infirmity” (2 Cor. 11:30; 2 Cor. 12:5,9,10) or “weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9; 13:4). In his life, Paul experiences a physical infirmity, rendering him in a state of weakness, and possibly limiting his ministry potential and effectiveness. It was in the place of his personal weakness that he learned that the power of God would dwell in him. Paul recognized that the gracious power of God would make up for what he lacked in physical ability.

Prayers for Healing

While we don’t know what form of suffering the thorn was, it is certain it was something physical that caused Paul to suffer a great deal of pain. As previously mentioned, Paul had pleaded three times that this thorn in the flesh might be removed, yet he did not receive healing. It is clear that Paul wanted this thorn in his flesh to be removed. The word pleaded is translated from the Greek word *parakeleo*, which was used earlier in 2 Corinthians 1:9 in the context of being comforted by God. As noted above, *parakeleo* can also mean “a request; to ask to come and be present where the speaker is, of being called to one’s side.”⁹⁸ This word is also used in Romans 12:1, where Paul appeals to Christians (the NASB uses the word urge).⁹⁹ Paul is strongly asking, urging Christ to come and remove the thorn, seeking comfort through God’s healing touch on his body. His prayer was answered as Christ comes not to remove the thorn but

⁹⁸ Arndt, et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 764.

⁹⁹ In Romans 12:1-2, Paul is emphasizing in strong terms that the Christian life of worship is a living sacrifice to God.

to have his power come upon him. With little medical treatment available, it could be argued that Paul had little remedy that could be offered beyond praying for supernatural healing. While today we have incredible medical solutions for our illnesses, even today treatment can be limited in its ability to treat chronic pain patients and provide for them a quality of life. Supernatural deliverance, for some, remains the only realistic possibility for healing.

Prayers for healing of chronic pain patients should be encouraged and, unless one feels that they have heard from the Lord to stop, should be a routine part of a chronic pain sufferer's prayer life. It is possible that Paul tried to convince the Lord that he had learned what he needed to from the experience and was ready to "move on." Yet the Lord answers his prayer not by healing, but by the assurance that His grace is sufficient.

My Grace is Sufficient

The thorn in the flesh illustrates the action of a messenger of Satan that was sent to torment Paul. Chronic pain is tormenting, but he was granted the grace to endure his thorn. It is possible that Paul was given a supernatural ability to endure his pain. The grace of God makes the difference with a person who is smitten with chronic physical pain, and who continues to live a life of God's power resting upon them. God's grace not only sustained Paul physically, but was the means to develop him spiritually.

For chronic pain sufferers who live within the framework of a theology of weakness, trusting in God to work these things out is crucial. In the midst of their suffering, they are given great insight in understanding that when we are weak, then we are strong (2 Cor. 12:10). Yet for the chronic pain sufferer, their state of weakness is always present with them. J. I. Packer encourages the sufferer to "lean on Christ . . . in all

your ongoing weakness you will be empowered to cope and will be established in comfort and joy.”¹⁰⁰

As I already mentioned, the majority view is that the power of Jesus is either perfected or brought to its end in our weakness. It is when we surrender and submit to God that He can move in our midst. In 2 Corinthians 4:7, Paul tells us “we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the exceeding greatness of the power may be of God, and not from ourselves.” This is a description of the treasure—God’s power—being displayed and maintained in a fragile clay human vessel. It is another paradox where God’s power is joined with our weak nature.

John Chrysostom, commenting on 2 Corinthians 4:7, notes that

this very thing is indeed the chiefest marvel and a very great example of the power of God, that an earthen vessel hath been enabled to bear so great a brightness and to keep so high a treasure . . . For both the greatness of the things given and the weakness of them that receive show His power; in that He not only gave great things, but also to those who are little.¹⁰¹

God has entrusted His power to fragile vessels, and has poured out His power to support those who are suffering. The grace of God can come to us through a sense of greater resolve to endure, or a willingness and creativity to reinvent a lifestyle that accommodates our infirmity. Being with Jesus in devotional time, reading scripture, different forms of prayer, in our weakness, making a priority to come into the presence of God. He is near to those who are broken; a broken and contrite heart he will not turn away from (Ps. 51:17). Most of us do not become broken—to the point of wanting a

¹⁰⁰ Packer, *Weakness Is the Way*, 52.

¹⁰¹ John Chrysostom, “Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Second Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians,” in Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. J. Ashworth and Talbot B. Chambers, vol. 12, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series* (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1889), 320.

deeper communion with God—until we experience some type of major calamity in our lives.

Paul understood that his weakness was the means to allow God’s strength to settle or tabernacle upon him. His proclamation of the gospel was in his speech but also in his manner of life. He lived the gospel through surrendering his will, not being dependent on his strength nor hiding his weaknesses. He believed that his weakness was the opportunity for God’s power to be displayed and that the exertion of his personal power to dominate, influence, and control was not in line with the nature of the gospel.

Paul did not have the markings of power that the Corinthians were accustomed to. For them, Paul displayed attributes that were undesirable and inconsistent with what they understood as power. Paul’s boasting in his weakness was counter-cultural both then and now, inside and outside the church. What we identify as power is not the same as what God does.

Jamin Goggin and Kyle Strobel, coauthors of *The Way of the Dragon or the Way of the Lamb*, share their experiences in their quest to understand what true biblical power is. One of the people they interviewed was J. I. Packer. During the interview, Packer gave them some spiritual formation advice in the context of weakness. Packer told them that “you need to have a fifty-year plan—a vision for growth over a long period of time as you embrace your weakness.”¹⁰² This insightful comment acknowledges the intentionality of living in our weakness in such a way that we are formed spiritually and honor God in the day-to-day process.

¹⁰² Jamin Goggin and Kyle Strobel, *The Way of the Dragon or The Way of the Lamb* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2017), 27.

A life shaped by a theology of weakness is a biblical model to strive for. However, it is not a life that is pursued or encouraged by modern evangelicalism. The typical evangelical model is based on modernistic thinking of progress and power. Those who suffer chronic pain rarely find a place in such a paradigm. They become people ministered to rather than appreciated or valued for the things that they can contribute. Their solution to attain spiritual growth is often found “outside the camp” of evangelicalism in personal prayer, devotion, and other spiritual disciplines.¹⁰³ It is from this foundation that they will not only be formed spiritually, but will become better attuned to the voice of God.

The idea of laying down our life in weakness so that God can raise it in power is described in many places of the New Testament. I think Jesus said it best when he told us all, “unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain” (John 12:24). We die to self so that Christ can be glorified in us.

¹⁰³ Hebrews 13:11-13. Christ suffered outside the camp, as a physical demonstration that the religious system of the day was not capable of providing a relationship with God.

SECTION 4: THE ARTIFACT

The artifact I am presenting is a book addressing the problems of isolation inherent in chronic pain sufferers and giving them a road map for understanding their personal spiritual formation process.

Written primarily for chronic pain sufferers, I decided to contain the full artifact within the required word limit rather than submitting a writing sample. Thus, the appendix presents the entire artifact as I hope to see it published. I have written in a style and a length that I believe is accessible for my intended audience.

My primary audience is conservative evangelicals. I introduce them to the ancient three stages in the spiritual life—purgation, illumination, and union—developed by many pre-modern mystics of the church. This format of spiritual growth is what evangelicals call sanctification. Over the years, many have re-contextualized these three stages of spiritual development, and I am also doing the same, presenting them in a way that is acceptable to an evangelical audience.

SECTION 5:
ARTIFACT SPECIFICATION

Michael J. Golden
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Dear Editor,

I am writing to introduce you to *A Thorn in the Flesh: Spiritual Help for Chronic Pain, Three Phases of Spiritual Transformation*, a nonfiction book that proposes to provide support to chronic pain sufferers as a spiritual compass to help them spiritually navigate their process in sanctification. Understanding how God is using chronic pain in their lives brings a sense of assurance that God is in control and that he can be trusted.

I have identified a variation of the three stages of spiritual life—purgation, illumination, and union—as the framework to identify God’s work of sanctification in our lives. This model directly relates to chronic pain sufferers, as they appear to experience a great deal of purgation due to the difficult nature of suffering from chronic pain. Physical suffering compounds our emotional suffering; the assurance of knowing that God has a purpose helps people stay focused on their relationship with Christ.

The target audience for this book is primarily evangelicals who suffer from chronic pain and their family members who live with them. The secondary audience is spiritual care givers: pastors, counselors, and spiritual directors who interact with pain sufferers.

My personal qualification is the experience of my wife suffering a serious back injury over 30 years ago that has left her disabled and forced to medically retire from her career in worker’s compensation claims administration management. She has endured the misinterpretations of her condition from both medical professionals and well-meaning but uninformed people in the churches we have attended. While limited in her mobility, she strives to live her life to the fullest, including her pursuit of God.

Professionally, I am currently a doctoral candidate in the Leadership and Spiritual Formation track at Portland Seminary. I serve as pastor of the church that my wife and I planted over 15 years ago and am a faculty affiliate at Kilns College in Bend, Oregon.

Thank you for your consideration, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Respectfully,

Michael J. Golden

Nonfiction Book Proposal Outline

Title: *A Thorn in the Flesh: Spiritual Help for Chronic Pain, Three Phases of Spiritual Transformation.*

Author: Michael Golden 66500 Ponderosa Loop Bend, OR 97703. 541.388.4737.
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Hook: Chronic pain sufferers need a spiritual road map that indicates to them the spiritual process happening in their lives. Knowing what is going on can be half the battle, so that people have a sense of assurance that God is at work in their lives, and they are free to be good stewards of their suffering.

Overview: This book places greater emphasis on identifying private devotion with God and recognizing the methods He uses in our sanctification. It notes the purpose and value of personal suffering, laments, and the three-phase progression of spiritual growth that was common in Eastern Orthodoxy and ancient Western Catholicism.

Purpose:

- Validate the hardships chronic pain sufferers endure.
- Confirm the legitimacy for personal laments.
- Reinforce the biblical idea that suffering brings spiritual growth.
- Provide a template to recognize the different phases in spiritual transformation.

Promotion and Marketing: Chronic pain affects more Americans than diabetes, heart disease, strokes, and cancer combined. This statistic should alert us that chronic pain is a common problem and we are just as likely to encounter people suffering from chronic pain as we do those who suffer from diabetes, cancer, and heart disease. While much has been said about an opioid crisis, very little has been offered by the medical community by way of their commitment in providing adequate pain treatment for those who suffer from chronic pain. This book gives chronic pain sufferers a voice that is empathetic to their struggles, assurance that they are being heard and supported, and a template that informs and guides their lifelong process.

Competition: Venter, Gerhard. *Through Pain to Victory: Christian Advice from the Trenches*. Baldwin, GA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012. Venter is a chronic pain sufferer who gleans from his personal experience to help other pain sufferers.

Prince, Rob. *Chronic Pain: Finding Hope in the Midst of Suffering*. Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2014. Prince is a pastor and chronic pain sufferer who brings practical advice based on scripture in dealing with chronic pain.

Pratt, Maureen. *Peace in the Storm: Meditations On Chronic Pain and Illness*. 1st. ed. New York: Image, 2005. Pratt, a pain sufferer with lupus, brings a practical guide for living with chronic pain and illness.

Uniqueness: This book is not a “how to” guide for doing well under chronic pain conditions. Rather, it is a roadmap that describes the process of sanctification pain sufferers find themselves placed in. An understanding of what a chronic pain sufferer experiences in relation to God’s work in their lives bring a sense of assurance that, despite outward appearances, God is in control. The importance of lamenting to God and understanding that suffering is a means of spiritual growth are also addressed.

Endorsements: None at this time. Among possible endorsers:

Ken Wystma, Pastor and founder of the Justice Conference.

Kyle Strobel, Associate professor of Spiritual Theology and Formation at Talbot School of Theology.

Brian Broderson, Lead Pastor, Calvary Chapel of Costa Mesa.

MaryKate Morse, Professor of Leadership and Spiritual Formation, Portland Seminary.

Carole Spencer, Adjunct Professor, Portland Seminary.

Duane W. H. Arnold, Church historian and priest.

Michael Newnham, Blogger and author.

David Robinson, Pastor, Cannon Beach Community Church and author.

Tricia Gates Brown, Theologian, garden designer, and emotional wellness coach.

Book Format: Softcover print and ebook.

Chapter Outline:

Chapter 1 Introduction

I begin the introduction by telling about my wife’s horrific struggle with acute chronic pain and the necessity of developing a personal devotional life that is not dependent on our corporate church worship structures. I address the shortcomings of spiritual formation in a typical evangelical church service and underscore that God wants to meet us and change us in settings that transcend the excitement of the corporate setting.

Chapter 2 Sanctification: Personal Spiritual Formation

This book is not so much about spiritual practices as it is about identifying the spiritual phases or processes that we experience and that form us spiritually. It is just as important to understand where we are, seeing the “big picture,” as it is to understand what we are to do. Think of this book as an aid to help you read your spiritual compass. Discerning what God is doing in our life enlarges our ability to know the will of God, which is often mysterious to many Christians.

Chapter 3 Lamentations

The characteristics of some trials, particularly suffering chronic pain, are such that we have little recourse or options available. The lament Psalms bring awareness to our own helplessness and need to worship God in spite of the difficulty. There are circumstances where there is no cure, no relief, no sense of meaning other than to bring our dismay before God, which, at times, is the most open, honest, and heartfelt worship mankind can offer to Him.

Chapter 4 Suffering as a Means of Spiritual Growth

Suffering is something that each person eventually experiences. Most people don't realize this truth until they are thrust into a place of personal suffering and chaos, and only after they have had time to come to terms with their condition. A difficult truth is that we often need to live in darkness to enable us to see the light. In times of darkness, our souls are purged of our false ideas so that we can see the light.

Chapter 5 Purgation

Purgation is a refining process where God reveals our carnality and, by His grace, enables us to release these things from our lives. The process itself can be difficult and painful. Those who suffer from chronic pain are in a continual state of physical trial; emotional, mental, and spiritual darkness that comes and goes that is the most difficult. This is where we can misinterpret God's purposes and begin to question His goodness.

Chapter 6 Illumination

Illumination is about seeing our new identity in Christ and submitting to God's ongoing transformative work. We understand the truth of God at a deeper level. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, isolation is transformed to solitude and we welcome our times alone with God. Our solitude is not just for us to cloister away into seclusion, but becomes the platform from which we exercise spiritual disciplines such as prayer, Bible study, and hospitality.

Chapter 7 Union

Union is the full realization of our identity in Christ. Paul encouraged his audience on Mars Hill that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is not far from each one of us, for "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:27-28). It is not that we don't reach this identity until we are in a place of union, it's my belief that this is the identity of those who are believers in Christ Jesus. When we reach that place of union we recognize God's hand and presence in every aspect of our life. We allow His presence to surround us.

Chapter 8 When the Darkness Persists

Resolve. I define resolve as the purposeful intention of pushing through wave after wave of difficult experiences that seem almost impossible to endure, yet

somehow finding a way. But it is not about a personal strength that we can depend upon. It is in the recognition of when we are weak, then we are strong.

Intended Readers:

Primary Audience: Chronic pain sufferers within evangelical churches.

Secondary Audience: Friends and family members of chronic pain sufferers, conservative evangelicals, spiritual care givers; pastors, counselors, spiritual directors.

Manuscript: Full manuscript is available. Word count: 24,336.

Author Bio: Michael J. Golden is a Doctor of Ministry Candidate, Leadership and Spiritual Formation, at Portland Seminary. He has earned a Master of Arts degree in Christian and Classical Studies from Knox Theological Seminary, a Master of Arts in Theological Studies from Trinity Seminary, and a Bachelors of Arts in Theological Studies from Trinity College of the Bible. He is an ordained pastor, currently serving in a non-denominational church that he and his wife planted over 15 years ago. Golden is also a faculty affiliate at Kilns College in Bend, Oregon and has taught at the School of Ministry at Calvary Chapel Bend. He has spoken at several men’s retreats, served as chaplain for the local Christian motorcycle ministry, and served as a board member of a resident discipleship home that ministered to men with drug and alcohol dependencies.

Golden has been married to his wife Mary for almost forty years. She has suffered from severe chronic back pain for more than thirty years and has endured the hardships of over 26 back surgeries, losing three inches of height in the process. She now lives with an intrathecal pump that delivers a low dose of pain medicine directly into her spine. She strives to remain active both in her personal ministry and as the wearer of many hats as the pastor’s wife of a small church community.

Publishing Credits: None.

Future Projects:

Letting Go While Holding On – This book covers that dynamic of the losses that each of us experience and provides realistic means of coping rather than a “get over it and move on” mentality.

In Search of a Home Port: Strengths and Weaknesses of Systematic Theologies – This book is a collection of memoirs in my journey transitioning from conservative, dispensational evangelicalism to a self-identified moderate position of post-evangelicalism. It also addresses the prevailing atmosphere of sectarianism within the church and suggests means to navigate that eventual conflict for those searching for their own home port.

Dealing with the Particulars – This book challenges us to search for personal application when reading or hearing the Bible rather than give in to the temptation of considered it applicable for others.

The Jesus Movement: Making Sense of a Lifetime of Influence – This book takes a critical look at the fruit of the Jesus Movement from a personal, historical view and identifies both its strengths and shortcomings.

SECTION 6:
POSTSCRIPT

My postscript will possibly be more personal than what is preferred, but I believe that academic endeavors, especially in Doctor of Ministry programs, not only address our minds but also our hearts. As Socrates said, “the unexamined life is not worth living.”¹⁰⁴

It has been over 30 years since my wife Mary experienced a life-changing injury, so, in a small way, this project has been over 30 years in the making. Medical practitioners have tried different things to help her, and we know that she would be much worse off had it not been for their efforts. She has a good attitude and stays as active as she can, which, at times, is an important part of the struggle. But unless God intervenes, her quality of life will not improve, but will eventually, like all of us, deteriorate. There is a profound sadness in our lives that is intertwined with faith, hope, and love: the threefold cord that is not quickly broken (Eccl. 4:12).

While I have not directly addressed the idea of mystery in this project, I am continually amazed by what appears as a randomness of God’s interaction in our personal lives. The more I explore about God, the less I understand of him. Some passages in scripture read rather concretely, but they don’t always happen the way the verse promises. For example, if you pray in faith, God will heal.¹⁰⁵ I have prayed many prayers asking for healing; most of the time I am met with silence. Either I didn’t pray in faith, or I misunderstand the passage of scripture that tells me to pray, or God has not willed to heal a person. We are left with the confusing, subjective world of spirituality, attempting

¹⁰⁴ Plato, *Apology*, 38a5–6.

¹⁰⁵ Many of the healing narratives in the four gospels point to faith being the basis for receiving physical healing.

to put the pieces together into some type of cognizant whole. In the end, we are all left with our own subjective understanding, and it is woefully incomplete.

My research has led me to believe that no group has a corner on the market of truth. The mystics understood God's nature is unknowable; however, we get glimpses of Him as He engages with us in the spiritual processes of purgation, illumination, and union. We, like Moses, must be stashed in the cleft of the rock with the hand of the Almighty protecting us from the immensity of His presence and knowledge of who He is. There is now a greater place in my world for acceptance of subjective ideas about God, both mine and others'. I desired to place a greater emphasis on these ideas in this project, but academic work needs good foundational support from others who have gone before us. I did not delve deep into mysticism in my artifact due to my audience being unacquainted with, and therefore suspicious of, ideas that have an epistemological foundation that is pre-modernism.

I read widely during my research—Catholic, Evangelical, Orthodox, Baptist, Anglican, Reformed, Arminian, Quaker and Pentecostal sources. They all seem to approach the throne of grace with equal hunger, but they do so along various paths. I am more convinced that their various systematic theologies are better understood as pieces of the pie rather than accepted as a whole, and they are to be recognized in the context of what they are—humanity's organized thoughts and structure for understanding the eternal God.

I had several what I call "Thomas Aquinas moments" during my research, thinking that everything I had written was rubbish and that I should stop, don a monk's robe, and head out to the desert. Perhaps someday. But I also realized that such a move, at

least in my own case, would be contrary to my conviction that ideas ultimately need to find a home in our souls, and then work their way outward. Also, I was deeply impressed that the difficulties and struggles in our lives do not define us, the final word in each of us who are of the faith is Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Christ engaged in the ultimate struggle for our souls, and he calls us as his co-laborers into the struggle. It has been an incredible inward journey, but to be complete, it must also have an outward expression. In the end, God works in mysterious ways, and all we can hope for in this life, it seems, is to touch the hem of His garment and be healed.

Through my artifact, I hope to provide a sense of comfort and confidence for people who, due to chronic pain conditions, are forced to spend more time out of community and live in greater isolation than those who have unlimited mobility. Some communal structures in churches are not accommodating to pain sufferers. This extends beyond how many disabled parking spots churches have or other ADA-compliant features they have installed. Cultural practices, such as prolonged standing during worship, communion that requires congregants to walk forward to receive the elements, practices of routine standing or kneeling, or worship services that extend beyond an hour can all be challenging for pain sufferers to regularly participate in. Providing an understanding of the framework of God's personal, sanctifying work in their lives is important to support a spirituality that is not dependent on church attendance and participation. It brings forward that God desires truth in our inward parts, and that participation in corporate worship, while important, is not the only means—dare I say not the primary means—for our personal formation and development of furthering our relationship with God.

For further research, I would like to spend more time with Orthodox theology, particularly the doctrine of *theosis*. The purpose of my artifact is to provide a clearer framework for God's sanctifying process in our lives and I felt that going deeper into the idea of *theosis* would only muddy the waters. There are several similarities between Orthodox and Pentecostal doctrines, as noted in Edmund J. Rybarczyk's work, *Beyond Salvation: Eastern Orthodoxy and Classical Pentecostalism on Becoming Like Christ*. While I did not consult with many of their sources for this work, I am looking forward to further studying Quaker sources and their appreciation of mystery. I want to explore these similarities and bring them into a Pentecostal context through a book that articulates these similarities and how they can enhance personal spiritual formation.

I would like to write on the Jesus Movement and how that time influenced the Calvary Chapel movement over that past 45 to 50 years. While their influence has waned over the past 15 years, Calvary Chapel was once a formative influence of many Baby Boomers' spirituality. Some of the problems they have encountered over the years were a result of misplaced priorities and theological interpretations in areas of pneumatology and eschatology, which, in my opinion, produced a collective spiritual formation that has been sophomoric and shallow. This was my tribe for many years and I understand their ethos and epistemological thought processes. Historically, they demonstrated that they are not open to criticism, either internally or externally, and such a work would need to be written with great care and sensitivity towards them.

I would also like to do more work in raising awareness of the challenges that chronic pain sufferers experience with their abilities to attend and participate in corporate worship. Evangelicals often want to segregate people into subgroups; they do so on the

basis of age, gender, and, in some cases, disabilities (drug and alcohol ministries come to mind). Support groups of all kinds have their place, but the body of Christ was not designed to operate in such fashion. Inclusion and valuing the pain sufferer in their chronic condition is needed for the body of Christ to learn the spiritual principle of strength through weakness. Pastors and church leaders need to be aware that segregation of any type is by nature exclusionary, and while chronic pain sufferers should not be paraded publically in a token fashion, they have a voice that needs to be heard. While I always advocate praying for healing, the church needs to become comfortable in fully accepting those with chronic pain as they are, rather than as we hope they will become.

APPENDIX

CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

A strong tension and a sense of panic permeated her hospital room. Alarms blared and nurses moved about with a sense of urgency as they attempted to do what they could to stop the nightmare. I was seized by a sense of shock, disbelief, and sheer terror, and had never felt so hopeless in all of my life. But I knew what I went through was nothing compared to what my wife Mary endured. I stood beside her bed after they wheeled her into her hospital room after her fifth surgical procedure in the past eight days to remove a fast-growing spinal infection. I wanted to get closer, but knew I had to give the nurses full access. Finally, I slipped between two nurses and took hold of her hand. Her pain level was beyond the nurses' and doctor's ability to control. She writhed in agony I'd never seen in anyone before. It was the most horrific scene I have ever witnessed. Her blood pressure was dangerously high. The week before, she'd had her second back surgery to remove scar tissue that was putting pressure on her nerves, when the unthinkable happened: she developed a serious infection in her spine.

I called our pastor, told him what was going on, and asked him to pray. I remember his prayer asking for this to "just be over," something we had been praying for the more than five years since her initial injury. Eventually, the pain medication caused Mary to sleep. I felt we had dodged a bullet. The surgical procedures needed to remove the infection saved Mary's life, but also caused permanent damage to her spine. She hasn't had a pain-free day since that infection.

Mary's story of chronic pain began five years earlier when she worked as a medical claims supervisor for a company bursting at the seams in growth. Her place of employment was overcrowded, with too many people and not enough storage space. She fell backward over a stack of files that were left in the narrow walkway between the cubicles. She felt immediate pain in her lower back and was unable to continue working. Her diagnosis went undetected for almost a year until she was sent to a team of specialists where a forward-thinking neurosurgeon ordered the right tests that confirmed three blown discs in her lower spine. Part of the reason for the delay in the diagnosis was that her initial MRI films were of poor quality. Her first surgery achieved limited success, and she was able to return to work—until scar tissue began to grow and put pressure on her nerves. Her surgery to remove the scar tissue was the cause of her infection.

After Mary's infection cleared up, she went through a series of treatments to address her pain. She had four different spinal cord nerve stimulators that were surgically implanted, along with numerous revision surgeries to reposition electrodes on her spine. One of her spinal nerves died, rendering her stimulator ineffective, and a second spinal infection caused her to be unable to accept another implant. She has since received some relief from a pain pump that injects a low dose of pain medicine into her spine. Eventually, Mary had to medically retire due to chronic pain.

What qualifies me to address chronic pain issues? While suffering is incredibly personal, it also affects others, especially those in the immediate family. Mary believes it is harder for the loved ones who helplessly watch the agony of a chronic pain sufferer than it is for the one enduring the affliction. I don't agree with her, but this has been a journey we have walked through together for over 30 years. When Mary had to medically

retire, we lost a significant portion of our family's income. We had to sell our home and our nice car, and drastically reduce our spending. We couldn't afford to help our son with tuition for community college. In many ways, we were starting over. Mary later went through a period of about six months where she was in and out of the hospital, and it was questionable whether she was going to survive. She doesn't remember much of those days, but it was a hell that I will never forget.

Misinterpreting Actions

Some years later, our pastor, Bob, recommended I fill in as a worship leader at another church some distance from home. Tom, the pastor of this new church, and his wife, June, extended an invitation for us to move to the new community and serve on staff at the church, located in the Sierra Nevada mountains. Before they extended the invitation, Tom did his due diligence in asking Bob for a reference as to our character, church attendance, and involvement in ministries. Bob gave a good report of my faithfulness to the church, then added, "we haven't seen much of his wife." The implication was that Mary might not be in a place of spiritual maturity for this level of ministry. Fortunately, Tom had enough insight to realize Mary was just as committed in her faith as I was and that she expressed it through her involvement in church ministries. She traveled with me every Sunday morning to church, getting up at 4 a.m., and made the trip up the mountain even in bad weather.

I've questioned whether Bob was aware of how often Mary attended church and if he had considered her chronic condition. He knew of her physical issues, but what he wasn't aware of (nor could he possibly be) was that she attended church as often as she could, sometimes being in church when she should have stayed down for the weekend. I

was in church almost every Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday night. Due to her chronic pain level, Mary was not always able to attend. She had several surgical procedures during the time that we attended that church, but she attended most Sunday morning services in spite of hardship. Bob obviously felt that her church attendance was below his expectation of church staff and leadership. I wondered if he even remembered that she would attend church, sitting in the back with an IV pole, that she taught Sunday School with me, that she was involved in serving on the church prayer chain, or that she hosted a women's Bible study at our home. Bob is a good man, a good pastor, and a personal friend, but pastors are not always as aware of the spiritual condition of their congregants as they tend to believe.

What influenced Bob's assessment of Mary was that he had not considered the breadth of ministries happening in his church. I was in ministry that was very public, serving on the worship team and substitute teaching on Wednesday nights. Mary was ministering out of view from most of the people who attend church, including leadership. There is a tendency to mistakenly believe those whose ministry is "out in front" are more spiritual than those whose service is not public. God sees these things differently, which we will address in the final chapter.

Tom could have interpreted Bob's assessment of Mary as a reason to disqualify us from serving in the ministry of his church, which, in hindsight, was part of the process that God did in both of our lives to bring us where we are today. Understanding the context and challenges of chronic pain sufferers can be a challenge for those whose lives are wrapped up in a fast-moving, highly productive church culture. What they interpret as a normal rhythm of life becomes the standard for assessing a person's spirituality and

commitment to Christ. They fail to consider those whose patterns of living require a modified tempo. Bob simply misread what was going on in Mary's life. The fact that chronic pain sufferers cannot engage in the rhythms of healthy, pain-free people is not an indicator of what God is doing in their hearts.

The Challenges of Community

The church is often the primary place for outward expressions of our relationship with God, and we tend to base our assessments of others' spirituality, Christian maturity, and faithfulness on how often a person attends church services or how active one is in serving through ministering to others. While these are good indicators of a person's commitment to the Lord, we have unwittingly formed a spiritual construction where attendance and service are considered major indicators of a person's spirituality. A person with chronic pain cannot fully participate in all aspects of church communion and activities. There are times when they are doing all they can to sit through a long (and sometimes dull) sermon. Sitting through a sermon is not the same thing as developing a personal relationship with God.

As a pastor, I believe church attendance is both important and encouraged in scripture. Hebrews 10:25 tells us not to forsake "the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the day approaching." Good things happen when the community of saints is together that may not often happen in our individual devotional experiences. Our love for God is expressed, at least in part, by how we engage with a community of people who claim to be followers of Christ. But I wonder, as the story about Bob and Mary illustrates, if we default to a false paradigm of spirituality that says godly people will be at church every

time the door is open and will pack their schedules full of church ministries. This creates an unhealthy form of spirituality, where service is not as much to God as it is to aggressive growth agenda set by church leadership. I don't believe Bob was an overly ambitious pastor, but his incorrect assessment of Mary told me he had been influenced by a broader paradigm within modern evangelicalism that focuses on church growth and activities.

The Individual Work of Sanctification

Many evangelical worship services prioritize creating a place for communion with God. Many of them accomplish that goal quite well. I have met people whose spiritual lives were fueled by their pursuit of the next exciting experience with God. Such pursuits became their purpose. They began to worship the worship experience rather than the God who is worthy of our worship. Our church experience, as vital as it is, cannot be the sole source of spiritual nourishment. There must be an individual commitment and expression where God meets us where we are. It is rarely as exciting as sitting in a worship service with the sound system cranked up and the band skillfully playing our favorite songs, but it is needful to fully develop into the people God desires us to be. Human

Who We Are in the Dark

What many Christians lack is a strong spiritual foundation that continues when the music has stopped and the preachers have said their final amen. Many of us are driven by experience, and this becomes the vehicle we trust in to have an encounter with God. However, God wants to meet us and change us in settings that transcend the excitement of the corporate setting. You cannot bring the church environment home with you as you lay in pain praying for God to touch your body and heal you. There needs to be substance

to our spiritual being that extends beyond the excitement of community into a personal devotion to God, where these experiences are not needed as much as they are appreciated and viewed as a blessing.

There needs to be more to our Christian spiritual experience than our church involvement. We need to live in the recognition of a personal, individual relationship with God where we understand His transformative work in us. This is especially important for chronic pain sufferers who, due to physical limitations, cannot always be as active as they would like. Their pain forces them into a place of isolation, but God calls them to seek Him in the darkness of their private lives. It is not a matter of choosing one over the other; it is taking hold of both private and public devotion and experiences that we might be fully transformed from glory to glory (2 Cor. 3:18). The pain chronic pain sufferers experience can force them into isolation, but God can transform that place into solitude.

CHAPTER 2:
SANCTIFICATION: PERSONAL SPIRITUAL FORMATION

This book is written to those who are surviving chronic physical pain and to the people in their lives who they love and who also love them. I call them survivors, because they are the most heroic people I know. To walk through life with little prospect of being healed from their condition requires a strength and courage beyond what most people are willing to attain.

I do not believe I can provide anything that serves as a cure to the spiritual and emotional pain that chronic physical pain sufferers endure. I do advocate for modern medicine and encourage people to pursue the right avenue of treatment to relieve their condition. I also encourage people to seek divine healing through prayer.

It is my intention to provide a means by which chronic pain sufferers can delve deeper into their lives both spiritually and emotionally, embracing their predicament as it is, while still pursuing medical and divine help.

We cannot expect God to do the sanctifying work in our lives without our cooperation and willingness to be transformed. Too often, our systematic theologies get in the way of our spiritual formation. It is clear to me that both the Old and New Testaments instruct us to pursue God. Without such action, our sanctification is, at best, truncated. There is so much that we battle in our thought life, passions, and desires, so we must avail ourselves to God.

This book is not so much about spiritual practices as it is about identifying the spiritual phases or processes that we experience, which form us spiritually. It is as important to understand where we are—that is, comprehending the “big picture”—as it is

to know what we are to do. Think of this book as an aid to help you read your spiritual compass. Being able to identify where you are in your walk with God and what it is He is doing and saying to you is valuable. Discerning what God is doing in your life enlarges our ability to know the will of God, which is often mysterious to many Christians.

When I was in college, I took courses in personal discipleship that taught me some spiritual disciplines to further engage in my relationship with God. The practices were centered on Bible study and prayer, and they have served me well over the years. I believe studying the Bible is important—I'm a pastor who teaches through books of the Bible—but I am not going to place strong emphasis on that discipline in this book. Rather, I want to concentrate on the work of the Spirit in our lives in what we as evangelicals refer to as sanctification.

Sanctification in the life of a believer is a work of the Holy Spirit. It is a progressive path toward holiness. In a broader sense, it refers to the idea of being set apart unto holiness for God's purpose. Article X of the New Hampshire Baptist Confession (1833) states that "We believe that Sanctification is the process by which, according to the will of God, we are made partakers of His holiness; that it is a progressive work; that it is begun in regeneration; and that it is carried on in the hearts of believers by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit . . ." ¹⁰⁶ As this confession states, sanctification is God's work in us, but we must avail ourselves to the Spirit to allow Him to have free reign in our transformation.

The path toward godliness requires that we are intentional; we cannot grow spiritually without effort. It is important, then, that we have some type of plan. The

¹⁰⁶ Walter A. Elwell and Philip Wesley Comfort, *Tyndale Bible Dictionary, Tyndale Reference Library* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 1163.

process of growth happens when we engage ourselves in spiritual disciplines. Paul told Timothy to “discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness” (1 Tim. 4:7, NASB). The word discipline is translated from the Greek word *gymnazo* and is used in a “figurative sense in describing mental and spiritual powers: and it involves the idea of training or to undergo discipline.”¹⁰⁷ This word also brings into the context the idea of self-control.¹⁰⁸

How the Spirit Works

It is not the disciplines in and of themselves that transform us, but the disciplines serve as a way of giving space for the work of the Holy Spirit in transforming us. The work of the Holy Spirit in the life of a Christian is vital in the process of our formation. The Spirit works through three primary areas.

The first way in which God speaks to us, both generally and specifically, is through the inspired word of God. The psalmist declares, “your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105). James tells us that we are “to be a doer of the word, not a hearer only.” Notice that James is not advocating Bible study as much as he is advocating biblical living. Yet I know of many people who have regularly attended good churches for years, listened to many good sermons that instructed them on how to live in the context of the Christian faith, and, for a myriad of reasons, gave up the faith. Their tragic stories reinforce that there is more to our spiritual life than what we comprehend intellectually. The word of God must be implanted in us to develop our relationship with God (James 1:21).

¹⁰⁷ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 208.

¹⁰⁸ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 751.

The second way in which God speaks to us is in the setting of prayer, both corporate and private. It is in prayer that we hear the “still small voice of God” (1 Kings 19:12-13). Prayer is more than something we do; it is something we live in continually. It is not an event, it is a life.¹⁰⁹ Our lives are the responses of what we have learned by reading, hearing, and studying the word of God. Prayer is our soul’s life-breath communion with the Holy Spirit. The Bible is our benchmark that guides our lives. Prayer is where we receive specific instructions from God on how to deal with the particular situations of our lives.

A third way that God speaks to us is through the communities we are planted in. What I love so much about small group studies is the intimacy of many of the stories that people shared about what the Lord was doing in their lives. Some of these stories described how the Lord gave them awareness of life choices that were not honoring Him. When people described their own transformation in such a transparent way, it often worked like a mirror which the Spirit used to speak to my own heart. One of the spiritual gifts is discernment, and I believe one aspect of that gift is the ability to discern what the Lord is saying to us; that is, the work He does internally. Such awareness is a gift from the Holy Spirit.

The Early Church Fathers’ View on Sanctification

Early Christian teachers envisioned a threefold process in the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit upon individuals’ lives. These three steps are purgation, illumination, and union. While these three spiritual states can occur in a chronological sequence, it is not uncommon to experience one or more of these stages in our lives simultaneously. An

¹⁰⁹ MaryKate Morse, *A Guidebook to Prayer, Twenty-four Ways to Walk with God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 16.

interesting characteristic of the Christian faith is its many tripartite constructions. We have the Holy Trinity: God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Some believe that man is an inferior trinity of body, soul, and spirit, while others accept a view that man is body and soul. Plato understood the soul as consisting of three parts: the appetitive, which refers to our bodily appetites; spirited, which we engage with the heart; and reason, which deals with rational thought. While this may be new to some readers, the tripartite soul as understood by Plato is a perennial theme in Western literature. Using this structure of the soul, purgation deals primarily but not exclusively with our bodily appetites (gluttony, drunkenness, lust, etc.), while illumination addresses our ability to reason spiritually. Union is the final stage, where our spirit feels united with God, a state that the early Greek Fathers called *theosis*.

It is through the threefold process of purgation, illumination, and union that we develop a deeper relationship with God. This is not the only way to be formed spiritually, but it is for me the best model through which we recognize our own depravity, which can hamper our spiritual growth, as well as the importance of the Spirit giving us understanding.

While the words purgation, illumination, and union are not specifically mentioned in the Bible, the concepts are. It is the same way with the word Trinity; it is not found in the Bible, but the Bible clearly describes God in three persons. In the lifelong sanctification process, we need a purging of our carnal nature (purgation) to enable us to see clearly the truths of God (illumination), so that we might become closer to Him (union).

One of the early Greek Fathers was Origen (c.185-c.254). While he owed much to Platonic thought, he constructed his view of sanctification as the progression of a person who had been baptized into the church and was living out their faith and focused on their pursuit of knowing God. He stripped Platonism of its secular content and used that framework to identify spiritual progress in the life of a Christian. This is very different than Platonism, which was primarily concerned with an intellectual pursuit of truth.

Origen observed that the three canonical writings of Solomon (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs) were ideal as a means toward spiritual development in the areas of ethics, human reason, and contemplation. Solomon's three books address the three distinct areas of our soul and provide a remedy for our deficiencies. Origen describes these three books as "the three general disciplines by which one attains knowledge of the universe."¹¹⁰

It is important to note that these three books are not exclusive as our guides to spiritual formation. There are other books in the Old Testament that are considered Wisdom Literature, and all the apostles gave good counsel for Christian living in their letters. The book of James specifically makes wisdom one of its central themes. Origen focused on Solomon's writings because he recognized that these books addressed the three stages of sanctification.

The book of Proverbs addresses morality and is described by Origen as the "one by which an honorable manner of life is equipped and habits conducive to virtue are prepared."¹¹¹ Proverbs gives us regulations for living and practical guidelines for dealing

¹¹⁰ Harvey D. Egan, *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1196), 26.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

with our own bodily appetites. Some of the admonitions contained in the Proverbs identify for us what is virtue and what is vice. Understanding how God sees our actions helps to introduce a purgative effect to our lives. As we heed the instructions/admonitions of Proverbs, we develop habits of goodness, and such habitual actions of goodness are a means of suppressing our baser appetites.

The book of Ecclesiastes addresses human reasoning and understanding, where Solomon distinguishes between vanity and virtue, and identifies what is useful and worthy to be pursued. This book primarily addresses matters that have to do with the reasoning part of our soul. Once our appetitive nature is purged, we need illuminating instruction to provide guidance for our reasoning so that we may pursue the things that are virtuous and set aside those things which are filled with vice. With the impulses of the flesh set aside, we need a new narrative that provides a new context for us to reason in.

The Song of Songs illustrates the union God has with people who have walked through the purgation and illumination process and are brought into a contemplative state with God. Origen believed that contemplation was “knowing and being known by God.”¹¹² Through contemplation, we achieve *theosis*, being united with God, which changes us into becoming more like Christ. Instead of being tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine, our emotions are strengthened, established, and settled.

Like Origen, Gregory of Nyssa (330-395) saw biblical support for a threefold way to God through the canonical writings of Solomon. Proverbs outlined the way of ethics, which Gregory saw as purgation of a person in their spiritual infancy. Ecclesiastes addresses the natural contemplation, where our reasoning is illuminated with the truth of

¹¹² Egan, *Christian Mysticism*, 20.

God. Thirdly, the Song of Songs depicts the place of union, but for Gregory it is a place beyond contemplation as one enters into God's darkness.

The rest of this book explores the spiritual process of sanctification, where the Holy Spirit does the work of purging, illuminating, and bringing us into a place of union with God.

A Word About Syncretism

Syncretism is defined by the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* as “the combination of different forms of belief or practice.”¹¹³ I understand the suspicion that some may have regarding the thoughts and doctrinal construction of some of the ancient church writers, particularly when they may have had Platonic and Neo-Platonic worldviews that informed how they engaged with the Holy Scriptures. What many do not realize is that we moderns do the same thing; that is, we incorporate our cultural worldviews into our understanding of the Bible. The cultural norms and practices we grew up with and currently live with inform our understanding of the world. A cultural worldview is like oxygen; we don't see it and we rarely acknowledge it (unless we run out), but life doesn't happen without it. In the same way, our cultural worldview is the framework through which we have the ability to comprehend the world around us. How we process and interpret information, including the Bible, is tempered by the cultural environment in which we live. Our values are shaped to some degree by our culture. We do not live in a

¹¹³ *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, s. v. “syncretism,” accessed December 6, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/syncretism>.

vacuum and no person is an island. We have greater influence on each other than what we might believe.¹¹⁴

Some would argue that our culture should not have any influence over our comprehension of truth and would most likely cite Paul's warning to the Colossians against being cheated "through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men" (Col. 2:8). What is missing in the English translations of this verse is the inclusion of the article "the" (*ho* in the Greek) before the word philosophy in the Greek manuscripts. Paul, then, is warning them against "the philosophy," which may have been a particular school of thought rather than a wholesale rejection of philosophizing.

Early Church history affirms this view. Some of the early Church Fathers such as Justin (100-165), Clement of Alexandria (150-215), and Origen were trained in classical philosophy and used those ideas to not only evangelize but explain the truth of the Scriptures. They were also well-learned in the biblical texts and did not interpret Paul's writing as a warning to stay clear of any philosophical thought. They were not heretical; rather they sought to construct a logical, reasoned argument for the faith in the world they lived in. In fairness, the same could be said of Tertullian's (155-240) anti-philosophical views. Being Latin and trained in law, he had little use for the musing of philosophy. Augustine (354-430) brought the use of philosophical interpretation into balance, arguing for a greater distinction of biblical doctrine from philosophy than that of his predecessors. Philosophy, with its understanding (however incomplete) of the spiritual realm, and its sense of justice and ethics, gave these early church leaders the framework to describe the wondrous Almighty God in a way that their contemporaries could understand.

¹¹⁴ John Donne, "No Man Is an Island," PoemHunter.com, accessed December 6, 2018, <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/no-man-is-an-island/>.

Understanding that our soul consists of three different characteristics is not a default to pagan ideas, but a recognition that we deal with appetites that need to be purged, that our reasoning skills need illumination from the Holy Spirit, and that our spiritual nature longs to be close to God.

While he had some different views of the three-stage spiritual process, fourteenth-century Englishman Walter Hilton describes God's sanctifying work in this way:

We, first being reformed in virtues, and having the face of our soul uncovered by opening of our spiritual eye, behold as in a mirror the heavenly joy, being withal full-shaped and oned to the image of our Lord, from clearness of faith into clearness of understanding, or else from clearness of desire into that of blessed love; and all this is wrought in a man's soul by the spirit of our Lord, as saith St Paul.¹¹⁵

Being reformed in virtues is another way of describing the results of purgation.

Virtue is moral excellence, or an appropriate response to a passion. For the Christian, virtue is becoming more like Christ, which means we must shed the appetites and desires of the world.

The opening of our spiritual eye describes the ability to see, which is illumination. Notice the progress that Hilton speaks of from having greater clarity into that of blessed love, which is a state of union, where we develop an even deeper relationship with God. Hilton is quick to add that these things are a work that the Spirit does in our souls.

Doctrinally, I see the three stages of the spiritual journey as a description of sanctification. There is the work of purgation, where for example we are told to purge the old leaven from our lives (1 Cor. 5:7). Secondly, illumination is the renewing of our mind that Romans 12 encourages us to pursue. This work of renewal is the process where we

¹¹⁵ Walter Hilton, *The Scale (or Ladder) of Perfection, A New Edition & Treatise Written to a Devout Man* (N.p.: Aetnea Press, 2011), 878-882, Kindle.

are transformed in our thinking (human reasoning) and become more Christ-like. Thirdly, we are given great and precious promises which move the spirited part of our soul and from which we take on the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4).

Why this Approach?

Why would I suggest such a model for chronic pain sufferers? Chronic pain not only affects our bodies, but also our minds and souls. The life of walking-wounded individuals places them in a unique place to seek God's presence. The psalmist says, "it is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes" (Psa. 119:71). Chronic pain brings not only physical suffering, but emotional, mental, and spiritual suffering as well. These different types of suffering are the means which God uses for our formation. It is true, "all things work together for good to those who are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28), even if we experience loss in the process. Chronic pain is humbling, which places the chronic pain sufferer in a place where God can do His work in our souls. God declares that "I dwell in the high and holy place, with him who has a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones" (Isa. 57:15). Humility is the first step in drawing close to God, and it is in our humility and brokenness that He promises to revive us.

Gregory of Nyssa identified an important concept that involved continually reaching forward to God. Gregory called this process *epektasis*, from the Greek verb *epekteinomai* that is translated "reaching forward" in Philippians 3:13. It is the recognition that "the path of rising to God is unlimited," that is, our spiritual development is like walking up a set of stairs where we go through different processes of

sanctification.¹¹⁶ Each step takes us closer to our destination, and it is possible that in each step we experience specific aspects of purgation, illumination, and union with God that help us continue up the stairway. Gregory believed that we experience the three different phases of purgation, illumination, and union throughout our lives. These three elements are not necessarily successive; that is, we may not complete one phase before moving on to another. Rather, they overlap into each other. For example, we can be experiencing a purgative period in our lives, but that does not rule out the possibility of experiencing either an illuminative or unitive moment. What I have learned from my own life is that the closer I get to God, the more I am aware of my own carnality that never seems to go away. In the same way, the more I learn about God, the less I am certain of what I know. There is so much more we can experience, and it is as Gregory described: an unlimited rising to God.

Be Still and Know that I am God

Many voices compete for our attention in today's world. God rarely competes with the other voices, yet there are times that He uses circumstances to get our attention. C. S. Lewis spoke about pain being a megaphone in our lives, which I would agree with, but the loud volume by itself does not automatically cause us to turn to God.¹¹⁷

Pain is indeed a megaphone which is accompanied by many suitors. Anger calls out to the pain sufferer, as does resentment, confusion, disappointment, and depression. In the midst of these callers is God. He is incredibly patient and sends out quiet invitations into our consciousness, calling us to come close. Often, we cannot hear the

¹¹⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, XI:1001 B-C., quoted in Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 91.

¹¹⁷ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), 91-93.

still, small voice unless we quiet ourselves and our desires and seek Him out. To do so requires desire on our part, as “we find Him when we seek Him with our whole heart” (Jer. 29:13). Such a quest can seem difficult, but the reward that God has for us is worth the work (Heb. 11:6). Where we are sometimes mistaken is thinking that if we have a deeper relationship with God, then the anger, confusion, and depression will dissipate. In some cases that is true. However, God comes to us in the midst of our physical and emotional struggles and does not always remove them. Instead, He strengthens us to live with them and hopefully past them.

The Pharisees in the time of Jesus were well-learned in the Hebrew Scripture,¹¹⁸ yet they did not receive “the Word of Life” who stood in their midst.¹¹⁹ Their unbelief caused their spiritual eyes to become dim, and the light that was within them became darkness (Luke 11:34-35). I’m convinced that much of their problem was that they were not seeking God as much as they were seeking knowledge of God. It is the difference between what has been called “head knowledge” versus “heart knowledge.” Paul understood the trappings that the pursuit of knowledge could bring. He tells us that “knowledge creates pride, but love edifies” (1 Cor. 11:1).

If the Holy Spirit dwells in us, we can develop our spiritual lives by listening to His voice. He speaks to us on a personal level. We need the Spirit’s guidance to unclutter all the information that we receive, separating the wheat from the chaff, and using that which speaks to our present situation to be implanted into our soul. I have found that I can get distracted from the voice of the Spirit, often by pursuing good things like deeper understanding of certain doctrines. Sometimes, the greatest detraction from the best is the

¹¹⁸ I am using the name Hebrew Scriptures instead of our normal use, the Old Testament.

¹¹⁹ 1 John 1:1.

good. There are times when the Holy Spirit leads us in a direction of personal growth, which we suspect is the difficult path, and we would rather remain in the light of the familiar.

Sometimes God desires to lead us into the darkness of our own souls, where He accompanies the anger, disillusionment, and depression, and from where He sheds His light into our hearts and works in us for His good pleasure and our benefit. The struggle doesn't necessarily go away, but the presence of God not only makes it bearable, but casts a different light into the situation. That is one of the purposes of trials in our lives. While they are unpleasant and we often look for an exit sign, trials are intended to drive us deeper into God. Trials are times of darkness where we are refined by God through purification. When we experience the darkness of purification, we can see the light, which brings us to a place where we are closer to God.

This is where chronic pain sufferers enter the spiritual refining process, only for them it is always accompanied by the presence of pain. There are times when the pain is severe and other times when it is manageable. Pain is a very personal experience; no two pain sufferers have the same experience at the same intensity. Regardless, this constant pain affects them emotionally and spiritually. If we refer to their physical experience as an analogy to the spiritual, chronic pain sufferers live a portion of their lives in ongoing darkness. Physical pain is a curse; it is a product of the fall of humanity recorded in Genesis. Yet God uses such hardships as His tools to not only purify His people, but as a way of keeping them close.

Jim was a man I met shortly after moving to Central Oregon. He had been fighting cancer, which was in remission at the time. About three months after our

meeting, I was told that his cancer had returned with a vengeance and he'd been diagnosed as stage four, which was inoperable. I told Jim that I was so sorry that he was ill again and that I would be praying for his recovery. Jim smiled and said something I will never forget. He told me, "God never wastes a trial." I knew at that moment Jim had just laid gold at my feet. Even though Jim knew he was terminally ill, he had what I could only call an earnest expectation that God was going to do something through his illness to glorify himself. It was an expectation that Jim received by faith as he went home to be with the Lord about four months after that conversation.

God never wastes a trial. Rather than attempt to figure out the cause of your chronic pain, step into the darkness by accepting your condition and God will show you the light. It starts with submitting to God's work of purgation. Before that, however, you might need to express some things to God in what is called the lament.

CHAPTER 3: LAMENTATIONS

The difficulty for chronic pain patients is the adjustments they must make in their lifestyles, which can, at times, be radical. Making changes in our lifestyle can be challenging for some people. It is especially difficult when people who thrived in their work environment suffer an injury or illness that requires that they be either reclassified vocationally or stop working altogether. The constant physical pain, the frustration of limited mobility, and the change in lifestyle that pain may bring can be overwhelming. When people find themselves in this predicament, where can they turn? As I have stated previously, it is necessary to find a good doctor and follow their directions. However, God transcends the physical, and He is an ever-present help in time of need.

The psalmists understood that God could be approached not only in our times of joy, but also in times of deep sadness and despair. The laments are honest expressions to God. They are cries for deliverance, relief, and, in some cases, attempts to reconcile living in the darkness of our chronic pain. Our Creator understands that we need a catharsis at times. After all, He made us, didn't He? We must release our emotions so that we can move into the necessary tasks of life. There is a biblical basis for us to express our discontent to God. Sometimes pain sufferers find it easier to accept their condition and make necessary changes after they have expressed to God their displeasure in the form of a lament.

Prayers of Lament

It is common among evangelicals to place such an emphasis on God's "wonderful plan for our life" that they tend to neglect the biblical mandate to engage with sorrows

and trials.¹²⁰ To deny ourselves biblical models of legitimate, godly expressions of grief prevents our spiritual development from growing into full maturity. If we avoid our grief, we are not expressing our whole person to God, which limits God's work in these areas of pain, disappointment, and disillusionment. The limitation is that we are not opening ourselves up fully to God. It is as if we think these things are not something we can approach God with, as if it is beyond His reach or something we need to keep hidden from Him. However, God desires that we bring Him all of who we are.

The psalmists understood that God beckons us to bring our entire life experience to Him in prayer. Bruce Waltke observes that the writers of the psalms expressed "the harsh reality of living... completely surrendered to God's will."¹²¹ When we deny our "disorientation before God,"¹²² we rob ourselves and others of the opportunity to recognize that God can be trusted within the contexts of our entire lives, particularly the times of trials.

The call of discipleship is one of self-denial as we submit ourselves to Christ in taking up our cross and following Him (Luke 9:23). This calling has the expectation that we will encounter difficulties, suffering, and trials. If God's calling includes experiencing these things, surely He has given us an avenue to express our sorrow to Him. He is the "God of all comfort" (2 Cor. 1:3). How else can He truly meet our need unless we address it to Him? Part of the purpose of a lament is to participate in the work of God in our lives.

¹²⁰ Bill Bright, *The Four Spiritual Laws*, Campus Crusade for Christ (Peach Tree City, GA: NewLife Publications, 1965, 1994).

¹²¹ Bruce K. Waltke and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 870. Kindle edition.

¹²² Walter Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 52.

Corporate Laments

Walter Brueggemann believes that the use of lament psalms in public worship affirms the sufferings of God's people.¹²³ Prayers of lament acknowledge the problems inherent with living in a fallen world, without an admission that God has somehow lost control. The average evangelical Sunday morning worship service rarely acknowledges those who suffer through prayers of lament, and, by not doing so, holds back a particular aspect of our heart from worshiping God. In the evangelical church culture of praise, the focus is often on joyous expressions; we do not think it is warranted to complain to God about our struggles. God invites us to express our heartache to Him. It is in this expression that we are able to clear away the fog and turn it to praise. Expressing our sorrow is a means to bring hope into our lives.

The trouble with corporate laments is that people are rarely in the same place in their current life experiences. Cultural barriers also make corporate lament difficult. Generally, the evangelical church in the United States does not express grief publically, with the exceptions of funerals or candlelight vigils after community tragedies. The idea of corporate lament is a countercultural expression that is largely foreign to us. We don't know what to do with people with troubled hearts in the corporate setting other than hand them a box of tissues and hope they sit in the back of the church.

The Struggle of the Christian Life

The disorientation and struggle of the human condition does not go away after we become a Christian. As I previously mentioned, the call to discipleship is a call of suffering through self-denial and carrying our cross. Some believe that any

¹²³ Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms*, 51-52.

acknowledgment of negativity is, in some way, being unfaithful, somehow an act of unbelief, as though the very act of speaking about our struggles concedes that God is not in control. Yet Paul's word of encouragement to the disciples was that "we must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). King David and other psalmists learned and lived their theology within the harsh reality of life even though they were completely surrendered to God's will. In times of struggle, including physical pain that has gutted people and left them without the strength to live a normal life, a syrupy, "happy-clappy" Christianity doesn't add up. There are more lament psalms than any other kind in the psalter, but such an expression cuts against the grain of the dominant approach in Christianity. In our church, we have started reading a psalm in our time of taking communion. When we read a psalm that expresses laments, I sense an uneasiness creep into the room. We are not used to engaging with these passages in the context of public worship. We either seek some type of ecstatic worship experience where we feel elated or we develop the stiff upper lip that is associated with Christian stoicism.

Is There a Balance?

Where is the balance between complaining and lamenting? We are told in several places in Scripture not to be a grumbler. Some believe that we can cross that "fine line" to where we are complaining against God, but such a line is not defined for us in scripture. The question is how do we steward our souls in the lament by trusting God when we are disheartened? When Paul asked God three times to remove the thorn in his flesh, God did not remove the thorn but told him that His "grace was sufficient for him" (2 Cor. 12:9). If we are seeking God in prayer, He will let us know if our requests are out

of bounds. Paul's requests of God were not met with disapproval; they were met with an abundance of His grace.

It is here that I would like to offer a suggestion to chronic pain sufferers: Our complaints are always better expressed to God rather than another person. In the latter case, chronic pain sufferers can become their own worst enemy. If we express our lament too often with others, we may wear out our welcome with them. Many people don't understand chronic pain and find themselves at a loss for how to address it. People don't always have a sense of longsuffering or the patience to hear such complaints, especially when there is no clear end to the other person's suffering—or laments.

Scriptural laments provide people with a proper, biblical avenue to seek remedy for their troubles. If people do not have a biblical model to follow, an outlet to express their discontent before God, they will develop their own way and will seek other remedies.

The characteristics of some trials, particularly chronic pain, leave us with little recourse or options to deal with them. The lament psalms bring awareness to our own helplessness and need to worship God in spite of our difficulty. God allows these things to happen in our lives to prompt us to trust in Him (Ps. 13:5) and develop our faith so that we might become complete in our walk and experience with Him (James 1:4). There are circumstances where there is no cure, no relief, no sense of meaning other than to bring our dismay before the throne of God, which can be the most open, honest, and heartfelt worship that mankind can offer to God. Worship from a life that has been afflicted with chronic pain shouldn't always sound like a dynamic expression of joy and praise that wells up from a happy heart.

Is There Any Pattern as to Who Suffers?

An interesting contrast is the experience of physical suffering by Job and Paul. In both cases, God appears to be the cause of their physical pain. Paul readily admitted that his “thorn in the flesh” was given him due to the extreme revelation that he had received through some type of mystical experience and vision of heaven. Instead of healing, God told Paul that His grace was sufficient. In contrast to Paul, Job was never given an answer for the reason God permitted Satan to afflict him. He had to search for meaning, but in the process found himself pressing further into God. Job experienced restoration but was never given an explanation for his suffering.

We do ourselves a disservice when reading the book of Job by fast-forwarding to the end, where he receives restoration that was even greater than all that he lost. Reading the dialogue between Job and his friends, who wrestle with trying to make sense of Job’s condition, is equally important. Much of their conversation is the expression of the human desire for certainty. Job’s friends declare things that are generally true in principle, but they did not apply to Job’s life. Their claim against Job was that he had sinned and if he would just repent and get right with God, all would be forgiven and he would begin the road to recovery. The problem with that premise is that Scripture tells us Job was a righteous man. Yet he experienced the darkness of losing all he had, including his children and physical health, and he was left with suffering pain from the boils that developed all over his body. His closest companion, his wife, advised him to “curse God and die.” In the end, Job’s life was restored, he was healed of his sores, he had more children, and his wealth was restored. His restoration, however, did not mitigate the incredible loss and pain he experienced.

Laments Help Us Learn of God

The unwillingness to pray prayers of lament is a reason some people have an anemic prayer life. When we refuse to lament before God, we are keeping a part of ourselves out of communion with Him. For God to do a full work in our lives, we must be open and honest with God. Anything else is nothing more than a shallow religious exercise. Jerry Sittser, in his book *Grace Disguised*, wrote about his own personal grief that he said put him on a trajectory that eventually became a collision course with God which forced him to engage with some complex issues.¹²⁴ As we pour out our hearts to him, not only does he hear us, but he begins to speak into our situation. He may not give an explanation but he brings comfort with his words that not only encourages us, but strengthen our faith as well. Laments are a form of relinquishment where we release these emotions to Jesus who, as MaryKate Morse described, “sits with us in the dark . . . and has shown us a way up from the grave.”¹²⁵

Honesty with God

Annie is a woman who, along with her husband, were meeting with my wife and I for marriage counseling. We sensed a lack of intimacy, that is, a heart connection, with her husband. I asked her to describe her prayer life. She told me that she didn't pray. The reason she gave for not praying didn't surprise me much. She essentially was angry with God about how some events in her life had turned out, and she thought He was not really doing a good job running the cosmos. I suggested that she tell God how she felt, and use

¹²⁴ Jerry Sittser, *A Grace Disguised* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 150.

¹²⁵ Morse, *A Guidebook to Prayer*, 135.

the time on her morning runs to do so. I gave her examples from my own life of some of the laments I had expressed to God when I was living through difficult seasons in my life.

About a week later, my wife told me that she'd had a conversation with Annie, who in the course of their talk said, "tell your husband that I cussed out God today." While this was not the prayer life that I was looking for and I did not want it to become her regular prayer style, it was a start. She was willing to be honest with God and felt the freedom to express to Him some of the things that hurt her deeply. She was too burdened by her pain to engage in God's goodness. She had to express her anger and unload some of her baggage. God was the only one strong enough to carry it for her. What Annie needed was confidence that she could address her hurts and disappointments to God without feeling that she would be judged or chastised.

Her prayer life transitioned from laments to eventually talking to God, which, in time, opened her up to listening to God. This is key. Prayer, when given from the heart, begins to sharpen our ability to hear God's voice. In time, Annie started talking to her young son about God. While she was a regular church attender, it was the place of private prayer where she felt free to tell God things that she was too reserved to tell anyone else. This began to free her. She struggled with the truths of Scripture, but, most importantly, had to be convinced that God is good. Annie's story is one that is still unfolding. She is still developing her understanding of who God is. But she has moved forward significantly because she was honest with God about how she felt.

God wants us to be honest with Him about the thoughts we have, thoughts that He already knows about anyway. His all-knowing power is inescapable, and yet even in the knowledge of all things, He loves us fully and completely. In praying our laments to God,

we might experience that He is that friend who sticks closer than a brother, and we can fight off that sense of isolation that many chronic pain sufferers endure. Like Job, we can lament and press in for answers, only to discover that we have been pressing into God, who is the One who absorbs our grief.

CHAPTER 4:
SUFFERING AS A MEANS OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Suffering is something that each person eventually experiences. As Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl notes, “suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death, human life cannot be complete.”¹²⁶ Most people don’t realize this truth until they are thrust into a place of personal suffering and chaos, and only after they have had time to come to terms with their condition. A difficult truth is that we often need to live in darkness to enable us to see the light. In times of darkness, our souls are purged of our false ideas so that we can see the light.

Darkness that Leads to Light

This pattern emerges in some passages of Scripture where there is the suffering of loss before the birth of something new. The Old Testament describes God’s work of judgment upon the nation of Israel due to its turning away from Him. What is characteristic of the prophecies of judgment is that they are also associated with a promise of restoration. What God is painting in His prophetic structure is an illustration of the reality that, in our lives, there is darkness before the dawn.

One of the Old Testament prophetic models is where there is a declaration of either the present suffering of God’s people or suffering that will soon happen. Some prophecies contain a declaration of judgment followed by the promise of a future salvation which has its fulfillment beyond the lifetime of the prophet and his contemporaries. This is seen a few times in Israel’s history. Abraham received the promise to inherit the land for himself and his descendants, but it was accompanied by

¹²⁶ Victor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, 3rd ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 76.

the prophecy of 400 years of affliction in Egypt upon his descendants prior to their returning to the land (Gen. 15:13). When Abraham's descendants were about to enter the Promised Land, they first camped on the plain of Moab. Their presence brought fear into the hearts of the Moabites, including their King Balak. The king sent for Balaam, a prophet of God, to come and curse Israel. Balaam was motivated by greed to use his spiritual gift, but he warned Balak that he could only say what God told him, nothing more. Balak asked three times for Balaam to curse Israel, but each time Balaam could only bless them. Balak was angry and about to send Balaam away, but God moved upon Balaam to utter a fourth oracle. This oracle was a prophecy of future blessing through the person of the Messiah. Balaam said, "I see Him, but not now, I behold Him, but not near" (Num. 24:15). Balaam was given a partial glimpse into the future, and saw faintly the concept that the Messiah would come.

Micah's prophecy followed the same pattern. It began with foretelling of an impending judgment upon the people of Judah for their disobedience and the associated suffering, but then was followed with a vision of a future hope. The people would suffer, but a Shepherd born in Bethlehem would come and care for His people. The people hearing this prophecy would not see its complete fulfillment in their lifetime. The fulfillment will come at the end of this age.

New Testament Solutions

The author of the book of Hebrews brought this idea forward in the eleventh chapter when he described those who lived by faith and trusted in the promises of God. "These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and

pilgrims on the earth” (Heb. 11:13). These promises will see their fulfillment far beyond both the “pilgrims” lifetime and ours, yet we will all experience them due to the resurrection.

This is the framework through which many pain sufferers relate to God. They see Him, but not now, not near. All that many of us seem to get from God are these fleeting glimpses of Him that seem to instill further longing served with a slice of hope. The pain sufferer lives with an awareness of the tension of hunger and hope.

How do we deal with suffering in our lives? It is necessary to have an eternal perspective. This is more than the hope of heaven, as important as that is. We need to cultivate our ability to see beyond the material to the spiritual. There are only so many answers that our material realm can offer us to make sense of the suffering that pain brings. Paul said that if we have hope in this life only, we are among all men most miserable. We must find something of eternal substance in this world that we can take hold of.

Paul provides another answer in his letter to the Corinthians. They were a church community grasping to hold any form of spirituality that might give them a sense of spiritual significance. The problem was, their search was tainted by their own lack of spiritual development. They didn’t know what was truly valuable. Their carnality needed some purging before they were able to construct their spirituality. It is possible that Paul’s instruction to them through his letters was primarily purgative in nature.

At the end of that wonderful discourse on love found in 1 Corinthians 13, Paul states: “and now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:13). When a person’s life has been turned upside down by chronic pain and

medical doctors say there is nothing more they can do (which I've heard many times), pain sufferers need something that transcends their physical pain and gives them a spiritual foundation to build upon. These three biblical virtues are yet another tripartite construction in the Bible. In a sense, these virtues become the theme or focus of the spiritual steps of purgation, illumination, and union. Faith is the main virtue that we hold on to when we are going through purgation; hope is our posture during illumination; and love is the dominant virtue in our place of union with God.

Faith strengthens our hearts as we walk through purgation. We need the confidence that God is in control of things that seem far beyond His reach or concern. Our faith defines who we are in the darkness; who we are in the dark is who we truly are. Who do you trust when you cannot see to take the next step? Mature faith trusts God in the process and does not depend on our ability to comprehend with certainty the purposes for which we suffer physical pain. A person who enters the darkness must trust that God is in control and is allowing these experiences to happen to further shape their life into the image of Christ. Understandably, that is an easy thing to say and a difficult thing to live out. Our faith enables us to see God even when he appears to be far off and, like the people mentioned in Hebrews 11, hold on to God's promises, even if they are not realized in our lifetime.

Hope springs forth from purgation in the same way that illumination does. Paul writes to the Romans that tribulation produces perseverance and character—one of the purposes of purgation—and then that character produces hope. Paul assures us, “hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us” (Rom. 5:3-5).

The promises of God are worth whatever we need to endure to obtain them. For some, the hope of heaven and witnessing the fulfillment of the prophecies where Jesus reigns provides enough hope for them to move forward in their lives. I know of some who have the hope of heaven, but their existence on earth appears at times like they are gritting their teeth through life. There is little spiritual growth in them. They have not availed themselves to much of the Spirit's purifying work in their lives and, while they have a heavenly hope, their hope has not been well-illuminated for life in the here and now.

It is through the knowledge of God that we develop a greater union with him. We come to recognize, like the Apostle John that "we love him because he first loved us. (1John 4:19). Our understanding of who God is brings us to a place where we love him more and desire more of his presence, power and grace. As our relationship with Christ deepens, we find a greater grace that strengthens and sustains us in our afflictions.

The Christian life is a road of struggle. Remember, Paul says that "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). The way of sanctification involves suffering and purging our old nature and evil habits, which, in my case at least, have a tendency to come back in all their strength. This is the basic idea behind asceticism, which does not necessarily mean cloistering in a monastery but facing our inner demons and allowing the Spirit to purge us. I don't think we ever are truly free of living through purgation stages in our life, because we are never entirely free of our old nature.

The issue that is difficult to accept for chronic pain sufferers is that their physical condition is like an unwanted package that has been delivered to their door. For them, the real question then becomes: What are you going to do with the package that has been delivered? I think most Christians have some type of unwanted package in their lives. The difference for those who are physically whole is that they can drown out the still, small voice of the Spirit by overworking, overeating and drinking, and excess recreation, and never still their hearts long enough to recognize that they have been called to be sanctified by the Spirit through His work of purgation.

We have the capacity to feel great sadness, happiness, and joy at the same time. Jerry Sittser describes our souls as elastic and says that periods of pain and suffering actually stretch us and “increase our capacity for darkness and light, pleasure as well as pain.”¹²⁷ These things are true of all people, not just chronic pain sufferers. What chronic pain does is provide a setting where a person is forced to allow God to do His work. While there may not be any other alternatives, many pain sufferers will reach for them nonetheless. Suffering chronic pain is not a guarantee that people will allow these circumstances to turn them to the Lord. The question for them and for us is, are we willing to be good stewards of their pain and ours?¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, 48.

¹²⁸ Frederich Buechner, *A Crazy Holy Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 1.

CHAPTER 5: PURGATION

A woman in my church has suffered for years with various physical issues including a self-diagnosis of fibromyalgia. She often complains of being in pain and without sufficient energy to maintain an active lifestyle. She prays for healing and often asks the church to pray for her, but years have now gone by and she has not experienced relief. To add to her misery, she is getting older and experiencing what appears to be age-related problems with her health.

Living without a remedy for her situation has led to frustration that has had an adverse influence on her spiritual development. This woman loves the Lord and reads her Bible and prays every day, but she does not demonstrate a heart of humility in acknowledging that her physical condition is a part of what God is trying to use to conform her into the image of Christ. Rather than accepting her condition, she fights by assigning blame to people and systems for the reason for her discomfort. She has either never recognized or has forgotten that part of the sanctifying work of God in the life of a Christian may come in the form of trials that purge us from our self-dependency. Her lack of acceptance prevents God's grace from flowing to her in the form of strength and transformation.

There are many things in each of our lives that need to be purged, refined, and conformed into the image of Christ. Purgation is the difficult part of sanctification that can be hard to experience. We are always in need of the cleansing work of the Holy Spirit. Our transformation is never complete, and we have a patient Father who suffers long with us as we are formed spiritually. However, when we are being purged, we

should not carry a sense of guilt due to committing some sin in our lives. The notion that a person suffers chronic pain because of some ongoing sin in their lives can be true, but to apply this cause-and-effect concept automatically upon a pain sufferer's life is usually unfounded, something that Job's counselors found out.¹²⁹ A "reap what you sow" theology has trouble reconciling the idea of the righteous suffering. It is a mystery that people feel they need to provide an explanation for, and the verses on sowing and reaping provide a logical argument. In truth, we don't know why God permits these things to take place in our lives. God's plan for some appears to include suffering, but the judgment upon our sin was paid for by Jesus Christ when He died on the cross. Through the course of our lives, God permits trials and suffering as part of the normal process of sanctification. There is much in each of our lives that needs purifying so that we can be formed into the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29).

What is the purpose of purgation? Our hearts need an ongoing transformational process as we always have the battle between our sinful nature and the new nature that God has implanted in us. Purgation transforms us to be good stewards of the truths of God. We have to be formed into a place where we can properly steward the truths of God. I knew a young man who attended a two-year Bible college and came back with a lot of head knowledge about the Bible. He definitely received his money's worth in his education, and I felt that he had learned well. What struck me, however, was a lack of any real formation in his life. He had not progressed in becoming more like Christ. He was an arrogant, domineering person who knew the Bible well. Often when he spoke, he

¹²⁹ The book of Job addresses the issue of righteous suffering, and humanity's feeble attempt to try to make sense of it. Job's friends told him he must have sinned, and if he repented, everything would be fine.

(like all of us) betrayed his heart; he knew the letter of the law but not the Spirit. His knowledge produced pride rather than humility.

Two things that negatively affect our ability to receive from God are becoming tainted by the world and leaning on our own understanding. These concepts are intertwined; when we think we have freed ourselves from worldly influence, we often default to trusting in our own insights in comprehending our spiritual lives in Christ. There is always the battle with moving forward in humility.

All of us are products of our cultural environment and are conditioned by a modern world system that conceptualizes progress and prosperity as our inherent right. Much of evangelicalism in the United States has bought into the idea that bigger is better, and that success or prosperity is an indicator of God's will. Yet these expectations are contrary to a person's experience who suffers chronic physical pain. Their physical limitations can limit their ability to participate in different church programs that are designed to foster church growth. A life of physical suffering does not fit well into the modern evangelical paradigm.

What is a challenge to us all is being overly influenced by our own understanding. Instead of acknowledging God in all our ways (Prov. 3:6), we tend to be much more self-reliant than what is beneficial to our souls. Self-reliance is a part of our cultural influence, but it becomes deeply rooted into our normal ways of thinking. We default to our own level of wisdom, which often is not nearly as deep as we tend to think it is. What is vital is to learn to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit. This is important when we read scripture, but also how we interpret the events that are happening around us.

A Disciple and a Pilgrim

The person with chronic pain has the opportunity to go deeper inward into their own souls. Paul's prayer for the Ephesian church was that "according to the riches of his [God's] glory, he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being" (Eph. 3:16, ESV). The Spirit empowers our inner person, but the deeper works of God require that He prepares us as a vessel that is able to contain the things He desires to teach us. One aspect of this deeper work of God's Spirit is done when we enter into the sharing of Christ's sufferings at a much deeper, personal level. Eugene Peterson says that in recognizing our resistance to the world's ways, a disciple is not someone who is simply learning information about God, but is developing skills in faith. The pilgrim is a person whose life is about a journey, where we are going somewhere. In the case of a Christian, the pilgrim's journey is going toward God through Jesus Christ.¹³⁰

The Apostle Peter addresses two facets of our life in Christ in his first letter. He encourages the church, reminding them that they are saved and kept by the power of God, and that our faith is precious and will be tested by fire. The testing of our faith is usually done in ways that are difficult for us to endure. He reminds us that because we are pilgrims in this life, we should abstain from the "fleshly lusts which war against our souls" (1 Pet. 2:11). The war that we experience as Christians can be with things external and physical, but the greater challenge is with our internal struggles.

This is where darkness comes in. We tend to associate darkness with oppression and evil, but it is seen many times in the scriptures as a place where God will visit His people. We cannot fully comprehend the light until we have experienced darkness. The prophet Isaiah said of the coming of the Messiah that "the people who walked in darkness

¹³⁰ Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (Downers Grove, IL: 2000), 17.

have seen a great light; those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined” (Isa. 9:2).

Deep Calls Out to Deep

I grew up in Southern California, seven miles from the Pacific Ocean. From an early age, the Pacific Ocean was my playground. I was about fourteen years old when a friend and I decided to go surfing one morning. I don't recall all the details, but we might have skipped school to go to the beach. It was winter, the beach was deserted, and there was a big storm somewhere out in the Pacific that generated strong swells that hit the Southern California coast. The waves were not excessively large, but they were thick, fast, and powerful. Additionally, the waves were breaking much farther from shore than normal, in what is known as an outside break. If that wasn't enough, there was a strong side current that flowed parallel to the shoreline. With the current's flow and rough surf, I was separated from my friend, but that wasn't unusual. I had been out in the water for about an hour, and after each ride, I had to fight my way outside, paddling through some big, rough, white water; broken, foamy waves with turbulent movements that are uneven and without any rhythm or pattern. The waves were consistently lined up, one after another, without any breaks between the sets. As I paddled to get “outside,” a set approached, and I could tell by the face of the wave that I was going to need to hurry to get over the top of the wave before it broke on me. I met the face of the incoming wave and started to paddle hard to get over it. As I got to the top of the wave (also known as the lip), its force grabbed my board and sent me falling backward to the bottom trough of the wave, and then it broke on top of me. The surfer terminology for this is “going over the falls,” and every surfer seeks to avoid it. The impact ripped my board out of my grip

and I went deeper into the wave. My board, being buoyant, wanted to surface, but the wave took it in a different direction and, with a quick, strong burst, snapped my board leash that was fastened to my ankle. Surfboards also serve as flotation devices and keep you from becoming overly fatigued by swimming through the surf; it can be a lifeline in rough water. I was in some trouble and would have to stay afloat on my own.

I went into what surfers call the “washing machine,” where I was rolled around underwater by the circular force of the breaking wave. Every time I thought I was surfacing, the momentum of the wave would force me back under. I had not had time to take a deep breath before going under, and I needed a breath of air. I started to panic, but somehow managed to get free of the wave’s momentum as it passed over me. I finally saw some light in the water and I broke through the surface. I spotted my surfboard about fifty yards from me. I looked behind me and saw another big wave approaching. I swam as fast as I could to get to my board before the next wave hit, but I wasn’t fast enough. Within ten feet of my board, a second wave broke on me and I went into the washing machine for a second time. Exhausted, I was afraid that I didn’t have enough energy to make it to shore, and I prayed the whole time as I struggled to make progress. I made all kinds of promises to God that day if he would only keep me alive—I kept none of them until later in life. I was finally able to reach the shore, fighting the incoming white water waves without the benefit of my board.

The first experience of being in the washing machine was scary. I was fighting to get to the surface and get a breath, and the turbulence of the wave had me at its mercy. Plunging me into the depths, pulling me up toward the surface, only to be pushed back down again. There was something mysterious about being in the washing machine. It was

very dark; all I could see was the dark green turbulent water. The wave held me in its clutches, and the more I tried to get out, the harder it kept me in its grasp. Fighting the current of the washing machine only made me more tired, and the best thing for me to do was to relax until the wave lost some of its power and momentum so that I could swim out the back side. I had to trust that the inertia and force of the wave would diminish and then lose its grip on me.

I learned some valuable lessons that day. When you are caught in the washing machine, you can't fight your way out. The energy of the waves is too strong. Rather than resisting the inertia of the wave, it is better to relax and let the force of the wave dissipate.

Secondly, my panic could have cost me my life. I struggled against the force of a wave that was much stronger than I. My panic was an indicator that I was not rightly reacting to the predicament I was in. I saw my ability to swim as a way out, but in hindsight, it was a deterrent. There are some forces we can overcome, but there are other times we are simply outmatched and cannot prevail by our own power. When we don't accept our situation for what it is, we affect our ability to properly assess what we need to address where we are.

Thirdly, I had to go deeper into the darkness to be released, allowing the power of the wave to pass over me. It seemed counter-intuitive, but in speaking with other surfers, and my own experience some time later, it was exactly what I should have done.

A few years later, I was talking with a friend about surfing and he told me, "God speaks to me when I'm in the washing machine." His comment got me thinking; being trapped in the washing machine is an illustration of what is going in the spiritual/emotional life of a person when they experience some form of trial or difficulty.

I thought of one of my favorite verses, Psalm 42:7. “Deep calls unto deep at the noise of Your waterfalls; all Your waves and billows have gone over me.” John Lange notes that the image in this verse is “not that of waves rushing after each other in rapid succession, but that of a man in an abyss of water whose roaring joined with the voice of unseen and unmeasured cataracts impresses him with a sense of great and imminent danger. The rush and roar at once excite and stupefy him.”¹³¹ Lange described my first experience with being in the washing machine. It is during times of trial, including ongoing chronic pain, that we cry out to God from the depth of our soul and He responds to the depth of our being. The waves that cover over us are his presence, which, as many have written, are comforting but often fearful. C. S. Lewis writes in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* a description of the lion Aslan, the character in this story who represents Christ. In answering the question if Aslan the lion is safe, Mr. Beaver says, “’course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”¹³² Too often we fear the Lion rather than pressing into the deep to experience His goodness.

Our fear of plunging into the depth of our own soul is understandable, as it can feel like being in the washing machine, where we are spinning around, uncertain which way we need to swim to get a breath of air. But if we do not enter the darkness of our own soul, we prevent our spiritual life from developing us into the type of person that Christ desires. We become our own worst enemy when we cleave to the known, not taking the step of faith into the deep. It is in the deep that we enter a time of purgation,

¹³¹ John Peter Lange et al., *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Psalms* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008), 284.

¹³² C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2000), 80.

the purification process where things like self-reliance and anger begin to be purged from us.

Life has a way of placing us in situations that we don't sign up for. The suffering of a chronic pain sufferer has pushed them into the washing machine in the same way that I fell into the wave's massive power. It wasn't by choice that I was there, but rather, circumstances happened that were beyond my ability to counter them. Sickness and injuries that cause chronic pain are the same way; they force people into lifestyles that they would not have chosen on their own. Their physical condition holds them under waves that they cannot escape from. Medical science can mitigate some symptoms, but their soul can feel trapped in a place of confusion and darkness and emotional pain. The pain sufferer has no choice of being in their condition, but they can decide each day to make the best of their present situation.

What is Our Response?

I sat in a large waiting room of a cancer center recently while my wife was with a friend during her first office visit with the oncologist. Our friend had been diagnosed with inoperative cancer that has spread throughout her body. The only thing the doctor can do is chemotherapy that will prolong her life for up to a year. The appointment was lengthy and I saw many people come and go who were in different stages of their illness. Some were noticeably depressed, some appeared to still be in shock, but there were a few, most of them with shaved heads, that seemed to light up the waiting room by their presence. They greeted people, hugged them, and did all they could to support the other patients. Everyone who was a patient there was experiencing their own washing machine, facing a potentially terminal illness. Each of them decides for themselves how to live in the

context of their illness, either being positive and going with the flow of the current, or fighting with every emotion against their condition while their bodies are losing the battle.

Purgation is a refining process where God reveals our carnality and, by His grace, enables us to release these things from our lives. The process itself can be difficult and painful. Proverbs 25:4 says, “Take away the dross from silver, and it will go to the silversmith for jewelry.” Dross is the impurity within the metal that is removed so that the silver will be pure and can be fashioned into jewelry. Those who suffer from chronic pain are in a continual state of physical trial; it is the emotional, mental, or spiritual darkness that comes and goes that is difficult, leaving us feeling like we are being rolled around in the wave.

There are several reasons for God’s purging work in our lives. One purpose is to remove idols and false spiritual practices. Josiah was king of Judah and he began to seek after God when he was sixteen, eight years into his reign. We are told in 2 Chronicles 34:3: “For in the eighth year of his reign, while he was still young, he began to seek the God of his father David; and in the twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of the high places, the wooden images, the carved images, and the molded images.” Notice the purging didn’t happen right away. It started after four years of Josiah seeking the Lord. It took another six years to purge the land. God is not in a hurry, and is patient in His work. Not everything is done in an instant, so we can find ourselves in a place of purgation often.

I have seen times where God removes people, places, and things that detract from our spiritual formation. God declares, “I will purge the rebels from among you, and those

who transgress against Me; I will bring them out of the country where they dwell, but they shall not enter the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the LORD” (Ezek. 20:38). This is the removal of all things that infiltrate and tarnish our lives, detracting from experiencing the reality of communion with Christ. Paul encourages the Corinthians to take an active part in their purgation. “Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us” (1 Cor. 5:7).

Purgation is also the work of cleansing our souls, removing the impurities out of our lives. David prays, “purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow” (Psa. 51:7). His awareness of sin in his life caused him to ask God to cleanse him and make him whole. Purgative work of cleansing refines us and enables us to worship with greater purity. Our pure hearts bring us into a greater fellowship or communion with God. “He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver; He will purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer to the LORD an offering in righteousness” (Mal. 3:3). Worship, in its various forms, is a means of expressing our love, thanksgiving, and devotion to God through the praises that we bring before Him. What blesses the Lord, in very special way, is when our worship comes from a broken heart, one that has yielded to the purging work of the Spirit in our life. “The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, and saves such as have a contrite spirit” (Psa. 34:18). Whether your pain is physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual, God is with you in your pain and desires to use it to bring you closer to Him.

Descending into Darkness to See the Light

A woman I know was struggling with the suicide of one of her best friend's adult son. Her strong sense of empathy caused her emotional pain that was compounded by her own suffering. I spoke with her about the need to be attentive to what was going on with her feelings and asked her to consider what God might be trying to say to her. She sent me a text later that evening asking if God permitted this young man to commit suicide as a sign to her that things could be worse in her own life. I don't think that was the case, but I do think that God was using this tragic situation to awaken her understanding of God's desire for her to know him. In her case, God was using her empathy in this tragedy to get her attention. In the process of her grief and confusion, God was purging out some of her incorrect presuppositions of what she believed about Him, which began to free her from her false ideas.

Times of Obscurity

Ministry is not always exciting and fun. Sometimes it is hard work and the struggles are compounded by what we might be experiencing in our own soul. There are times where we experience a work of God's purgation in our souls but there is no reason that we can understand as to why it is happening.

One weekend I was extremely tired, having gone into the woods on both Friday and Saturday to cut firewood. Doing the bulk of my studying for the Sunday sermon on Saturday, I found it hard to stay motivated and fully awake to spend time in prayer, thought, study, and meditation and to feel that I had spent adequate time to prepare my message for the Sunday service. I woke early on Sunday morning, as is my custom, and I felt a sense of spiritual and emotional fatigue. I wanted to call in sick and spend the day

in solitude to try to comprehend what I was feeling. I also knew that calling in sick was not a possibility and I did not want to neglect my calling as a shepherd of the church God has entrusted me with. I decided that I needed to read a prayer devotional to help bring me out of this low spot. I read through the morning daily office, but it didn't lift my spirits. Driving in to the church, I felt very depressed. But I also knew that I had a job to do, and asked God to be faithful in place of what felt like my own unfaithfulness. I felt like my heart was not engaged, nor did it desire to minister to God's people. I struggled with asking myself, where is God? Why does He seem so far away? God was faithful and gave me the spiritual energy that I needed to accomplish His will for the day. I came home after church and had to run into town to do some errands, and I felt even more depressed. In spite of my feelings, I kept going. Later that night, I realized what I needed was God's purging work of whatever it was that felt so heavy, draining, and depressing. In the end, I moved on from that experience without having concrete answers. What was God doing in my life that day? Why was it so difficult to get back on track?

The experience left me with a sense of darkness that John of the Cross would call the *obscura*. To this day, I don't understand what was going on or why I felt so badly. It is a very scary thing to stand up in front of people and wonder if God will use me. Will he be there to make up the deficit in my own soul? I had to trust in what God has promised, that he would never leave me nor forsake me (Heb. 13:5), and that "if we are faithless, He remains faithful; he cannot deny Himself" (2 Tim. 2:13). These experiences are scary, it causes me to question whether I am being a good steward over my own life and ministry. Am I being a vessel Christ can use? Perhaps doing a check of my own heart and asking these questions was the purpose of that experience. There are times that God takes us into

places where we are without any reference and we may not glean anything from the experience other than learning to trust him more.

Allow God to Search You

One of my favorite passages in the Bible is found in Psalm 139, where the prayer is “search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psa. 139:23-24). The word translated anxieties is defined as “troubled thoughts, anxious thoughts, the processing of information which causes distress and anxiety in one’s mind and heart.”¹³³ God’s comfort comes to us when we set aside time to be in His presence and allow Him to deal with our anxious thoughts. But this is not an automatic process; rather, His comfort is reached when we first allow God to sift through our heart, often revealing to us things that are not helpful in our spiritual formation. It is the negative attitudes, the misguided longings and desires that are allowed into our minds and hearts that need to be purged from our thoughts and actions.

God desires that we are purged of these things so that we might see the illumination of His Spirit. One of the things that bothers me is having dirty glasses to see through. I use a smaller notebook computer to write with, and dirty glasses make it more difficult to see my writing. Purgation is the cleaning of my spiritual glasses so that I might see the wonderful things of God that I do not know (Job 42:3).

¹³³ James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew (Old Testament)* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).

CHAPTER 6: ILLUMINATION

The transition from darkness to light is part of the structural format in some prophecies that reveal, in a progressive method, the coming of the Messiah. Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, is an example in the Bible where we see purgation followed by illumination. He was serving in the temple, offering incense in the Holy place, when the angel Gabriel appears to tell him his prayers had been answered and his wife Elizabeth will bear a son. However, Zacharias did not believe Gabriel, and asked how such a thing could happen to an elderly couple? Because of his unbelief, Gabriel told Zacharias that he would be unable “to speak until the day these things take place” (Luke 1:20). Was this a punishment to Zacharias for his unbelief? Or was this a work of the Spirit in purging Zacharias so that when he did speak again, the first words he uttered are an incredible prophecy about the Messiah as recorded in Luke 1:67-79?

Can you imagine what Zacharias’ life was like being unable to speak? His silence must have lasted a minimum of nine months, but it could have been longer. Both he and his wife Elizabeth were no doubt overjoyed by having their own child, but he couldn’t verbalize his feelings. His inability to speak was a constant reminder of his unbelief. His participation in the social life of his village was limited; he was unable to share his views of Torah in routine discussions that the Jews called a Midrash, nor could he fulfill his duties to teach the people (Deut. 33:10).

After the birth of their son, everyone gathered on his eighth day for circumcision and to reveal his name. The expectation of that time was to name the son after the father. Elizabeth had told everyone present that his name would be John, but the people did not

believe her and asked Zacharias what the child's name would be. Zacharias asked for a tablet and wrote that his name would be John. Immediately, he was able to speak.

Zacharias is filled with the Spirit and he begins to prophesy. The first words which he spoke after months of silence were "blessed is the Lord God of Israel" (Luke 1:68). His prophecy concerns both the ministry of his son John and the redeeming work of the Messiah. He spoke of the dayspring, the Greek word *Anatole*, which literally means the dawning, the upward movement or rising of the stars, particularly in describing the sun rising out of the east in the morning, where darkness is changed to light. Zacharias uses this word in a figurative way to represent the coming of the Messiah.¹³⁴ It is the Messiah who will rise out of darkness and bring us light.

Zacharias' experience depicts the pattern of a time of darkness producing God's light. He lived for a time in a type of darkness by not being able to speak. His time in silence was apparently fruitful purging him of his unbelief. When he finally is able to speak, there is no self-vindication, no explanation for his muteness, but a purposeful expression of blessing the Lord and prophesying. At some point during his time of silence, Zacharias moved from purgation to illumination.

There is little doubt that Zacharias experienced isolation during his time of silence. Isolation is a common struggle that many pain sufferers endure, which can be difficult for other people to comprehend. Not only can they not feel another person's pain, but they can fail to recognize how physical limitations can bring feelings of isolation. While isolation can cause some people to feel sad and depressed, these emotions open up receptivity for God's purgative work. This is a hard truth to accept,

¹³⁴ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 74.

but rarely do we enter purgation when things are going well. As noted earlier, suffering often produces spiritual growth in our lives if we humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God.

Illumination is not only the ability to rightly understand the Holy Scriptures, but to have the ability to properly discern the leading of the Holy Spirit in our lives. God orders our steps (Ps. 37:23), and He also leads us in such a way that we have an awareness of His direction. Eugene Peterson remarks on this work of clarity by God in quoting John Baillie: “I am sure that the bit of the road that most requires to be illuminated is the point where it forks in the road.”¹³⁵ Illumination serves to enable us to see the leading of God in the particulars of our life.

Paul writes in some of his letters about the illumination of grace that he experienced in his Christian walk. Paul writes to the Colossians of his desire “that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, and attaining to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:2-3). His desire is for us all to attain to complete wealth in our understanding of the mysteries of God. The Greek word translated mystery (*mystērion*) is that which involves something that was formerly unknown by humans, but has been revealed by God to a person or group. There is much about God and our relationship with Him that needs illuminating by the Holy Spirit so that we can understand and experience the fullness of God.

¹³⁵ John Baillie, *Invitation to Pilgrimage* (New York: Charles Scribners’s & Sons, 1942), 8, quoted in Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, 28.

How we interpret the Scriptures is also something that we develop, regardless of what system of theology we ascribe to. We tend to forget that the Holy Scriptures were given to us as a means to understand the ways of God and to grow in the knowledge of Him, not to simply make us all into theologians. This knowledge aids in our transformation from glory to glory. Illumination is that time where we have greater understanding to comprehend not only the word of God, but how it is incorporated in our lives. Illumination is God's gift of knowledge through which we, along with the Holy Spirit's empowerment, live a life that is pleasing to God.

Paul also described what could be interpreted as illumination to the Corinthians. He tells them, "it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6, NKJV).

Light that shines out of darkness is an apt description of the light of illumination coming out of the darkness of purgation. Paul tells us it shines in our hearts and enlightens us to the knowledge of the glory of God. Illumination brings us into greater conformity to Him, drawing us closer to where we see the light of His treasures, because we have become closer to Him. It is a way of helping us see without the clouded vision caused by our own carnality.

While there are various views of the three stages of the spiritual life, Greek Orthodox Elder Joseph the Hesychast describes illumination as a state of clarity which a person through divine grace, has "a radiance of mind, clearness of thoughts and depths of ideas."¹³⁶ Illumination can be described as divine light through which a person mentally

¹³⁶ Elder Joseph, *Monastic Wisdom, The Letters of Elder Joseph the Hesychast* (Florence, AZ: Saint Anthony's Greek Orthodox Monastery, 1998), 33.

perceives truth and has a greater ability to discern. Paul tells us, “the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is rightly judged by no one . . . for we have the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:14-16). It is the Holy Spirit that does the work of illuminating our minds.

Transitioning from Isolation to Solitude

A common characteristic that chronic pain sufferers experience is loneliness and a sense of isolation. While this is a sad predicament to be in, it places the pain sufferer in a position to take the initial step of purgation, and then to convert their loneliness to solitude, which is the emergence from purgation to illumination.

Henri Nouwen writes of the difficulty of converting loneliness to solitude. “To live a spiritual life we must first find the courage to enter into the desert of our loneliness and try to change it by gentle and persistent efforts into a garden of solitude. This requires not only courage but a strong faith.”¹³⁷ Such transitions are difficult for many reasons. To begin with, a pain sufferer needs to learn to be comfortable with being alone and battle the passions of feeling lonely or bitter toward others who do not suffer. Solitude requires endurance through a time of loneliness and such an experience is something that continues throughout a person’s life.

The process of attaining solitude requires that we go deeper into our own loneliness to learn about who we are, and where it is that God is desiring to take us. Elizabeth O’Connor, who served on staff at the Church of the Savior for over forty years,

¹³⁷ Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out, The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Double Day, 1986), 34.

believes that such introspection is necessary to grow, and without paying attention to our inner selves, we have an external form of religion without the spiritual life that is intended to accompany our practice.¹³⁸ This is an incredible claim. While we need community, our strongest place of spiritual formation is when we spend time alone with God. Our best insights are often attained while in places of loneliness and darkness, because that is the setting where we don't have to pretend, but can be completely open with God and allow him to examine us. The psalmist recognizes the importance of self-examination, asking himself, "why, my soul, are you so dejected? Why are you in such turmoil? Put your hope in God, for I will still praise him, my Savior and my God" (Psa. 42:5, CSB).

When we try to run away from our loneliness, we will do whatever we need to do to quiet that nagging sense of longing and incompleteness. Many people are uncomfortable with silence and need to drown it out. Henri Nouwen observes, "as long as we are trying to run away from our loneliness we are constantly looking for distractions with the inexhaustible need to be entertained and kept busy."¹³⁹ I witnessed this need for diversion and entertainment one Mother's Day at a local restaurant. It was busy, and they don't take reservations on that day, so we waited for about an hour for a table. I noticed most of the people were engaged, not with each other, but their devices, checking e-mail, playing games. Sadly, there was little talking going on between the people who were huddled in the waiting area.

¹³⁸ Elizabeth O'Connor, *Journey Inward, Journey Outward* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1968), 14.

¹³⁹ Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 49.

Everything that we have in life is on loan, we have things—health, wealth, loving relationships—that can be taken from us at any time. Chronic pain sufferers understand this better than most people. They can go for days, weeks, months, and even years with relatively stable pain control that, while not pain free, is manageable. But then the unexpected can happen. A slip on the ice, picking up a package that was too heavy, being hit by a shopping cart in the grocery store parking lot, a car accident, or being pulled off their feet when trying to walk an overly enthusiastic dog. If everything in our life is on loan, then we need to be thankful for the good in our lives and appreciate what we receive.

If we can cultivate the discipline, the greatest means of spiritual formation is found in solitude. I agree that we do need other voices speaking into our lives, but it is when we get alone with God, that He can separate the wheat from the chaff. The longer I live, the more I believe that people often don't have insight into their own lives, let alone someone else's. However, God has all the insight we'll ever need. I realize that solitude is dangerous if we don't escape our own subjectivity, and the balance for that is in hearing other voices.

I live in an area that is rural, very different than the busy, noisy, active environment where I grew up. It been almost 16 years and yet I still miss some of that activity. But I also recognize that this place is preparing me for eternity. It is here in the solitude of the high desert that I am learning to hear the voice of God and see His presence in His handiwork. I miss living in a big metropolitan area, but the quiet here has taught me a slower tempo that makes it much easier to hear God. Richard Foster, in engaging with Thomas A' Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*, speaks about solitude as “a

primary discipline in the spiritual life.”¹⁴⁰ We need to spend time alone with Jesus. I believe this is where we hear Him the best. Spending time alone with God, learning to hear the voice of the Spirit, is a discipline that we learn to develop with practice.

Spiritual Disciplines that Help Us See

Illumination is about seeing a new identity in Christ, and is a lifelong process of our formation. We are being conformed into the image of Christ, a solid Christian experience where we continue to grow in the faith and change from glory to glory. There is clearer vision in this phase to see what God desires for us. Through various spiritual disciplines, we walk the journey toward God’s unfolding will. Elizabeth O’Connor describes the importance of having a goal and then engaging in disciplines to meet that goal. Paul’s goal was to “press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:14), which is a purpose that we all should strive for. The Christian Standard Bible translates the phrase “upward call” as “heavenly call,” indicating that our goal is not complete until we get to heaven. We have been called into a lifelong practice of daily seeking God.

The best spiritual disciplines are those that work for you, and that you can do on a regular basis. I always encourage people to read the Bible and other good books on spirituality. I know of people who read only the Bible, and I know of those who read rather widely. However that works for you, be purposeful in establishing a regular time to engage in some form of spiritual discipline.

¹⁴⁰ Richard Foster and Emilie Griffin, *Spiritual Classics: Selected Readings on the Twelve Spiritual Disciplines* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2000), 154.

My personal experience with disciplines has varied over the years. I like to read smaller portions of material that I can stop and give greater thought to. Silence and solitude are two disciplines that I have increased my time practicing. God speaks to me in the depth of my soul when I am silent before Him. Sometimes what He says is tangible and memorable; sometimes it is at a depth that extends beyond my ability for words. Silence has positively affected my social life and ministry. I listen more, give out less advice, and ask more questions. I'm listening for the voice of God. Even as a pastor who gives out spiritual counsel, I am trying to speak less. I've even taken steps to shorten my sermon, wanting to give people less to think through, which hopefully will encourage deeper thinking on their part. James tells us, "so then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God" (Jas 1:19-20). If we keep an open ear, it will occasionally prevent us from saying things that we wish we hadn't.

Discerning Our Path

Illumination is not only the ability to rightly understand the Holy Scriptures, but the ability to properly discern the leading of the Holy Spirit in our lives. God orders our steps (Ps. 37:23). He also leads us in such a way that we have an awareness of His direction. The Bible does not give us specific directions in decision making and discerning God's will. It is in learning to discern the voice of the Spirit that He leads us. Years ago, a friend of mine's young adult daughter was emotionally paralyzed with fear of making the wrong decision about choices in her life. I was confident in this young woman's love for God, and I told her to make some decisions, and if they are the wrong

ones, God will reroute you. In that process, you will learn to hear his voice better. She stepped out on faith and made some career decisions, through which God has blessed her.

The Word of God Illuminates Our Soul

The Psalms have many passages that encourage the use of and praise the benefits of daily engagement with God's word. God's word is the primary means of God's communication with us. The word of God provides direction for our lives and truth that is revealed, as I previously mentioned, by the Holy Spirit. "The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD, and He delights in his way" (Ps. 37:23). It is God's word that is a lamp to our feet and light to our path (Ps. 119:105).

Mary has had a long habit of writing the word of God in a journal. She will also write down her impressions of what the Spirit is saying to her in a passage. This is a form of prayer through which Mary communes with God. There are times when her pain is intense, too strong for her to read a devotional or commentary. Yet she can write Bible verse in her journal that she has been meditating on and memorizing. The action of writing God's word seems to open the Spirit to minister to her inner person and speak to her regarding various things in her life. This is a great benefit, as the centerpiece of Mary's communion with God is from God's word. Too often, we can construct our own ideas about God which then inform how we live. While it is true that we all deal with personal biases in our interpretation of the Bible, we have a source outside of ourselves, God's word, to enlighten our life.

A Humble Vision

Often, we see life through a lens of pride or humility. If purgation has done good work in our lives, we come out of that experience with greater humility. As I mentioned

earlier, like with the young man who went away to Bible college but was unchanged in his heart, there are times when we learn the things of God without having the proper spirit to steward them well.

Humility is necessary for our growth. If we become proud in our illuminated state, God has a way bringing us into another state of purgation, to humble us Peter tells us to “humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time” (1 Pet. 5:6). God will exalt us if we are humble; I tell people that is one of His jobs. But if we try to do His job for Him by exalting ourselves, He will then do our job for us, that is, to humble us.

Hospitality as a Discipline

Service to others is considered a spiritual discipline and it is the natural outgrowth of what illumination brings into one’s life. Those who suffer from chronic pain have to decide what type of service works for them. It is important to share life with other people; with the possibility of certain exceptions, God has designed humanity to be connected with others.

Mary has had a ministry with many women over the years teaching monthly card making classes. Through these classes, she is able to give of herself to these women, many of whom do not attend our church or are not followers of Jesus Christ. It can be hard work for her, and at times challenging to her physically, but this connection with and service to others is something she looks forward to every month. Her presence with these women has placed her in a position to counsel, encourage, and be a source of comfort for them.

Conclusion

As I mentioned above, illumination gives us a better ability to see how we are being conformed into our new identity in Christ by submitting to God's ongoing transformative work. With the ongoing work of transformation, it is rather common to be in a place of illumination and purgation at the same time. We understand the truth of God at a deeper level. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, isolation is transformed to solitude and we welcome our times alone with God rather than dread the deafening silence. The Spirit gives us the ability to comprehend the Holy Scriptures and He also speaks to our heart to lead our lives. Our solitude is not just for us to cloister away into seclusion, but becomes the platform from which we exercise spiritual disciplines such as prayer, Bible study, and hospitality.

CHAPTER 7: UNION

Our union with God begins the moment we are born again of the Spirit, and this relationship informs the two previous stages of spiritual growth. It is because we have union with God as His child that the works of purgation and illumination take place. The unitive process is a cycle that reciprocates upon itself. It is in finding God that we have the ability to find ourselves and that further enables us to find God even deeper.

There are different theological views of what union with God is, however, before we look at what union is, let's take a quick look at what it is not.

Union does not mean that we take on a divine nature. There always has been a distinction between God and man; taking on a divine nature would erase that difference. We cannot become divine, for God is eternal, without beginning or end, while every person has a beginning. Humanity, in our fallen state, cannot commune with God. However, that gap was bridged by Jesus Christ, God the Son, becoming flesh.

What union truly is, then, is the full realization of our identity in Christ. The Orthodox Study Bible defines deification as becoming “more like God through His grace.”¹⁴¹ Paul encouraged his audience on Mars Hill to seek God, and feel their way toward him and find him. Yet God is actually not far from each one of us, for “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:27-28).¹⁴² It is not that we don't reach this identity until we are in a place of union; it is my belief that this is the true identity of

¹⁴¹ Peter E. Gillquist et al., eds., *The Orthodox Study Bible: New Testament and Psalms, New King James Version* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc, 1993), 561.

¹⁴² Epimenides, Cretan Seer, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed December 24, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Epimenides>. The author of this saying is unknown, but there are those who attribute this to have possibly been Epimenides, a sixth-century Cretan seer, reputed author of religious and poetical writings.

those who are believers in Christ Jesus, and such has always been the case with them. For example, Paul tells us that we are seating in the heavenly places with Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:6). When we reach that place of union with God, we recognize his hand and presence in every aspect of our life. We allow His presence to surround us. This is what some have described as becoming more like God because he has given us more of his grace. This does not mean that we become divine, however, there is always a distinction between humanity and God.

The relationship of love is the primary virtue when we are in the place of union. Hilton addresses this concept of the love relationship union. He says that all “we can do here is to have a desire and a great longing and thirsting for to be present with Him.”¹⁴³ This coincides with what Paul speaks about in 1 Corinthians, that we currently see dimly in the mirror, but one day we will see Him face to face (1 Cor. 13:12). Much of our union with God in our present state is the deep longing that we have for him. It is not the attainment of a state of perfection, but a life that lives closely to God.

Union is not necessarily about some mystical experience. It is a place of both spiritual maturity and encounters where we experience a close communion with God. There have been times when I felt very close to God through certain experiences either corporately or privately. Sometimes that sense of His closeness fades quickly, like the glory that was on the face of Moses. Other times, this sense of union with God lingers. For me, these experiences usually are followed by times of further purgation where it can feel like God is punishing me. But God is faithful to do his refining work in our lives was

¹⁴³ Walter Hilton, *The Scale (or Ladder) of Perfection, A New Edition & Treatise Written to a Devout Man* (N.p.: Amazon Digital Services, 2011), 878-882, Kindle.

we submit ourselves to him. God’s work, no matter how painful, is at the same time glorious. In my experience, union in its purest form—if there is such a thing this side of eternity—is often short lived, but it is also something that I long for.

Partakers of the Divine Nature

The foundational verse for this experience is found in the second letter from Peter.

He writes:

His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust (2 Pet. 1:3-4).

In these two verses, Peter is implying the processes of purgation, illumination, and union. We read in verse three that “His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness.” The word power here in the Greek is *dunamis*, which is also used in Acts 1:8 in identifying power from the Holy Spirit. The Spirit’s work does a deep work in our hearts while giving us everything that pertains to life and godliness through the knowledge of Him. Knowledge is descriptive of illumination which enables us to be partakers of the divine nature, that is, we have union with God and receive the benefits and blessings of relationship with Him.

The Greek word translated partakers has its main element the idea of fellowship or sharing.¹⁴⁴ Because of our relationship with God, He empowers us with his Spirit and shares with us attributes of His divine grace or energies. What we know about God is through how He interacts with humanity rather than comprehending the unknowable, raw

¹⁴⁴ Friedrich Hauck, s. v. “*Κοινός, Κοινωνός, Κοινωνέω, Κοινωνία, Συγκοινωνός, Συγκοινωνέω, Κοινωνικός, Κοινώω,*” ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 797.

nature or essence of God. Yet, God not only gives us His grace, but His sharing is close and personal. Part of the divine nature we have is the gift of the Holy Spirit who dwells in us as a guarantee of our inheritance (Eph. 1:14). Paul tells us in Ephesians 1:3-14 all the promises and blessings we have in Christ. The language he uses is highly personal. It is not that God writes us a check and sends us on our way; rather, He gives us Himself.

We become more like God through the grace that He gives us, fulfilling our predestined state of being conformed into his image (Rom. 8:29). Union with God is something that we experience right away when we become a Christian, but it becomes the primary description of a work that God is doing in us after we have gone through times of purgation and illumination.

Strength in Weakness

Union is a place of sanctuary with God. Eugene Peterson uses the word sanctuary to identify all the holy places of God, and these places are not restricted to buildings. Drawing from 1 Samuel 21 and 22, Peterson finds that sanctuary is the place that not only increases his awareness of God, but also a place to find strength and weapons for the fight.¹⁴⁵

The battle is real, and for chronic pain sufferers, the fight goes on every day. Living with a chronic pain sufferer for over 30 years has taught me how real the battle is in the struggle for some type of quality of life and to grow in grace rather than sink into bitterness and depression. As Peterson notes, the means of strength and weapons that David found in the sanctuary at Nob were bread and a sword, both which are symbols

¹⁴⁵ Eugene H. Peterson, *Leap Over a Wall: Earthy Spirituality for Everyday Christians* (New York: HarperOne, 1998), 65.

that represent the word of God. When chronic pain pushes people to their limits, it is in the sanctuary of God's presence where we are sustained, strengthened, and supplied with the necessary tools to continue the battle.

Let's flip around 180 degrees and talk about Christ dwelling in us. The holy place of union provides for us a greater awareness of who we are in Christ, and what His relationship with us consists of. One of the paradoxical facts of our Christian life is in recognizing that our weakness is our greatest asset. Paul understood this through his experience of his thorn in the flesh. In 2 Corinthians, Paul tells of an incredible experience where he either was in heaven, or was having a vision. He heard things that were too wonderful to repeat to others. This wonderful spiritual experience was not without cost. To keep him from becoming proud, a messenger of Satan was sent to strike him with what he called a thorn in the flesh. The thorn was some type of physical condition that caused him a great deal of pain.

An important thing to take notice of is that Paul had an incredible, miraculous experience that would be considered union with God, only to be plunged back into the darkness of physical pain and experience more purgation to keep his pride at bay.

Paul found his thorn in the flesh painful and limiting, but he recognized it as the source of great spiritual value by providing balance in his life. It was his means for growing spiritually. J. I. Packer observes, "we should recognize that the fierce and somewhat disabling pain with which Christ in due course required him to love, and that he clearly accepted as a weakness that would be with him to his dying day, had in view

less the enriching of his ministry than the furthering of his sanctification.”¹⁴⁶ Packer touches on an important concept in the Christian life. It is more important what we become in our spiritual formation before God than what we do for Him. While our culture, including much of evangelicalism, is obsessed with activity, God is calling us aside from the busyness of life and the drive to be productive to a place where we can quiet our soul and be transformed by Him. As I talked about service in the last chapter, it is vital that we spend time in close fellowship with God so that our vessels can be filled.

We experience union with God through our weakness so that His strength that is dwelling (the Greek is literally “tabernacling”) with us might be made perfect. God has entrusted His power to those with fragile vessels, and has poured out His power to support those who are suffering. Marva Dawn notes that Paul’s power comes to an end due to his weakness, and it is “through weakness that Christ is able to reveal His presence.”¹⁴⁷ Without recognizing and embracing our own weakness, “our power becomes rival to God’s” and only through union with Christ and the power of the Spirit in our weaknesses can we experience and display His glory.¹⁴⁸ God’s grace comes to us in a fuller measure when we recognize our weakness, and it can take the form of a greater resolve to endure, or an openness and creativity to reinvent our lifestyle into one which accommodates our infirmity. God is near to those who are broken, and will not turn away from the broken and contrite heart (Ps. 51:17). Most of us do not become broken—to the

¹⁴⁶ J. I. Packer, *Weakness Is the Way: Life with Christ Our Strength* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 52.

¹⁴⁷ Marva Dawn, *Powers, Weakness and the Tabernacling of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), 44.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.

point of wanting a deeper communion with God—unless we experience some type of calamity.

Paul understood that his weakness was the means to allow God’s strength to dwell upon him. His proclamation of the gospel was in his speech but also in his manner of life. He lived the gospel through surrendering his will, neither depending on his strength nor hiding his weaknesses. He understood that his weakness was the opportunity for God’s power to be displayed and that exerting power to dominate, influence, and control others was not consistent with the nature of the gospel. Paul’s physical issues were undesirable and inconsistent with what they understood as power. Paul boasted in his weakness that the power of Christ might dwell upon him (2 Cor. 12:9). That’s counter-cultural, both then and now, inside and outside the church.

Jamin Goggin and Kyle Strobel, coauthors of *The Way of the Dragon or the Way of the Lamb*, share their experiences in their quest to understand what true biblical power is. One of the people they interviewed was J. I. Packer. During the interview, Packer gave them some spiritual formation advice in the context of weakness. Packer told them that “you need to have a fifty-year plan—a vision for growth over a long period of time as you embrace your weakness.”¹⁴⁹ This insightful comment acknowledges the intentionality of living in our weakness in such a way that we are formed spiritually and honor God in the day-to-day process. It is, as Eugene Peterson says, “a long obedience in the same direction.” We’ll talk more about Paul’s thorn in the flesh in the next chapter.

¹⁴⁹ Jamin Goggin and Kyle Strobel, *The Way of the Dragon or the Way of the Lamb* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2017), 27.

CHAPTER 8:
WHEN THE DARKNESS PERSISTS

Each year on Saint Patrick's Day, Mary is reminded of her work injury and how her life was radically changed. Her initial injury happened on March 17, 1988. There is the lament of a loss of wholeness, the regret of a vocational life that was prevented from reaching full potential. There are numerous experiences that we have been unable to do together, such as hikes through the mountains or riding my motorcycle down the California coast. There have been the failed medical procedures, the misdiagnoses from emergency room personnel who initially suspected that they were dealing with just another drug seeker. There has been the well-meaning but uninformed friends who thought they had a remedy, or couldn't understand why she doesn't get better. All of this converges in her mind each Saint Patrick's Day.

The times of darkness can immobilize us, keeping us in a place where our motivation is gone. We wish there was a way out, and yet we realize even that is futile. Sometimes it seems that God is cruel to force us to live through these things without remedy, and sometimes, there are no good options. Life becomes a drudgery, a struggle. Joy is fleeting, and the longing we have for wholeness drones on in our hearts. We've talked about suffering, bringing our laments to God, walking through the purifying work in our lives by the Holy Spirit, being enlightened by Him, and finding union with God. All these things are good, but for chronic pain sufferers, they do not take away the physical pain. There are still the difficulties of living in a body that constantly hurts and the pain that continually challenges in a way most people do not experience. The capacity to live life to the fullest—whatever that means—is diminished. There are the regrets for

missing out on so much and the dark cloud of purgatorial guilt that prompts the sufferer to ask what they did to deserve all of this. All the while, God appears to be silent to these questions.

Resolve

In the time of writing this book, my wife experienced increasingly severe pain in her spine. Her pain prevented her from being able to lay flat on an exam table. Her pain physician suspected a spinal fracture and ordered a bone scan. The problem was that the bone scan would require that she lay flat. I knew she was dreading this appointment, having had them before, knew that even doubling up on her pain medication (with her doctor's permission) would not be enough to keep the procedure from being excruciatingly painful. Before the procedure, the technician told her that they would need about 20 minutes, which for someone suffering severe pain feels like an eternity. Mary then asked the technician to give her a countdown every five minutes as a strategy to strengthen her resolve. Her plan worked, and while in incredible pain, she got through the necessary procedure.

What was telling for me is after the procedure, the technicians called me in to help her off the table. She was in terrible pain. I told her to breathe—she was already doing that—and then I tried to reassure her that it was over. Her response to me stopped me in my tracks. She said, “It still doesn't take the pain away.” We walked slowly out of the imaging center, no doubt a spectacle to most of the people in the waiting room, and made it to our car.

“It still doesn't take the pain away.” Such a grim reminder of helplessness, which left unchecked, leads to hopelessness. Yet we wonder why so many people become

addicted to pain medication. Why wouldn't they want to medicate and tune out the physical pain along with the accompanying emotional pain from the severity of their situation? Medical science cannot cure all the bodily symptoms, nor can pastors and counselors effectively address all the associated emotional loss that chronic pain brings. My first response after Mary told me how much pain she was in was to send up a short, silent prayer asking, how long, oh Lord? Mary's initial injury was over 30 years ago and this is her "normal" day-to-day experience that she has lived with since then. The silence of God impresses upon us that she will live this way until she goes home, and the prognosis is that she will probably get worse with time.

Medicine deals with the body; I'm interested in seeing God touch the soul. What is so important in helping chronic pain people recover their soul is to find within themselves the resolve to walk through these terrible experiences and endure them as long as it takes until the intensity of the physical pain subsides.

I define resolve as the purposeful intention of pushing through wave after wave of difficult experiences that seem almost impossible to endure, yet somehow finding a way. But it is not about a personal strength we can depend upon. It is in the recognition of when we are weak, then we are strong.

Remember the story I told you about getting caught in the washing machine? After going through the second wave, I was exhausted and I felt like I was not making any progress swimming to shore. The surf was turbulent and powerful and there was a time that I thought I wasn't going to make it. I kept sinking below the water line. I prayed for God to save me and somehow get me to shore. God was gracious to me that day. I could have drowned, but I asked for His help and His mercy was upon me. Resolve says

to God: it's either your strength and power that gets me through this or I can't make it. It is the strength of God dwelling upon us in our weakness that I spoke about in the last chapter (2 Cor. 12:9).

Mary had to have the resolve to ask for the strength of Christ to get her through that appointment. It was a continual battle from that day she got the phone call notifying her of the appointment until the days after the appointment that were necessary for her to recover from the experience.

Resolve is the result of a life that has experienced purgation, has received illumination, and has found union with Him even in the abyss of chronic physical pain. I see it as a grace of God, not something that Mary earns, and is no different from the grace I received by not drowning in the ocean that day. It is a supernatural experience from the One who says, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."

The Thorn in the Flesh

God's grace is sufficient for us, but often we want the type of grace that eliminates suffering. Why shouldn't we? Who wants to live with chronic pain the rest of their life? As I touched on last chapter, the Apostle Paul was given a thorn in the flesh that was an agent from Satan that tormented him. We don't know what the thorn was in Paul's life, although it is apparent that it was something that caused him a great deal of pain.

Paul was a chronic pain sufferer.

Paul didn't want his thorn in the flesh. He prays three times for God to take away the thorn. I suspect that Paul might have told God that he has learned his lesson; he may have promised God that he wouldn't be boastful and that the thorn could be removed

without any damage to him spiritually. I would have tried to make a deal with God, something I've done many times. I've tried to convince God that we don't need suffering in Mary's body and that we could do so much more for the Kingdom without it. After Paul's third prayer, God told Him that "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Paul continues: "Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (2 Cor. 12:9). Paul would rather brag about his weakness rather than boast of his strengths. The power of God rested upon him. That word "rest" in the Greek could also be interpreted as "tabernacle," referring to a dwelling place. Christ's power, His presence, dwelled in Paul because of his weakness. That's union with God: he is able to commune with God on a deeper level, through the presence of Christ dwelling in him in a mighty way. Paul had to remain aware of his own weakness and set aside any notion of self-sufficiency to continue to do the work of the ministry.

Mind-numbing drugs are not the answer. Resolve is. I understand that some people need to take pain medication, and that they can be trusted with following prescribed protocols. Rarely does pain medication take away severe chronic pain, it simply takes the edge off so that the pain is not so severe. A pain-free existence from someone who has suffered serious injury or illness is unrealistic and beyond the reach of medical science. Paul understood the need for resolve in Christian faith, telling the Thessalonians, "to this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power" (2 Thess. 1:11, ESV).

Going with the Flow

Mary has said it is during the time of intense suffering that in comprehending God enormous being, that you understand how small we really are. This describes a cyclical relationship between purgation and illumination. As in the case with Job, we are not always give a reason for suffering, but are called instead to trust in God and that he is working in our lives. Our entire life is about God's sanctifying work within us. There is a plan, but it is often obscured from our view. Most of the time, the best we can do is glean from the situations that we face, in spite of how unpleasant they may be.

Faith, Hope, and Love

Does the experience of darkness increase our faith? I can only hope that is the case. There was a time I would have quickly said yes to such a question, but I have seen many times where people flounder in their trials, or situations that are outside of their understanding of God's goodness and blessing. I've seen other people go into dark times in their own lives and not fare well in the process. I think what these times are intending to teach us is a greater dimension of faith which brings hope, and not an explanation for our trials. We think of "increased faith" as having the ability to do better in trials and overcome adverse conditions. It could be that in our quest for certainty that we lose the understanding of what living by faith means.

Physical pain and the associated loss push people to the place where they either receive more grace or reject what God has given them. Either response is not something that is automatic, and it doesn't happen right away. However, as we purposely set our hearts to worship God in spite of our feelings or circumstances, there is what can only be described as a breakthrough. The emotional pain loses its grip on us and we realize that

our chronic pain condition is not the final word of who we are, but God the Son on the cross suffering and dying for us is the final word that not only declares us righteous and forgiven, but also accepted and beloved in the household of faith. Jesus Christ and Him crucified is the only thing of any substance that we have to hang on to. It is the love of God that gives us hope that we continue to place our trust in.

In the end, we choose. I worship with all that I have, despising the pain and suffering in Mary's life, but loving the One who has saved me with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. We trust God's ability to give us faith to believe in dark, hope for the light of a better day, and the "love of God has been poured out in our hearts" (Rom. 5:5).

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