



PREACHING TO PEOPLE IN PAIN

MATTHEW D. KIM

*George F. Bennett Professor of Preaching and Practical Theology
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary
South Hamilton, MA
mkim@gordonconwell.edu*

INTRODUCTION

For this conference, Jesse Nelson asked me to speak about a new publication, *Preaching to People in Pain*. This book released in May of 2021 with Baker Academic. It's a book that has long been on my heart as someone who has pastored people who are broken and hurting. How many of you have broken and hurting people in your churches today? I can assure you that all of us do. I remember pitching the book idea to Baker initially proposing the title of *Pain-Full Preaching: Sharing Our Suffering in Sermons*. For whatever reason, the marketing team relayed back that *Pain-Full Preaching* may not sell so why don't we title it *Preaching to People in Pain: How Suffering Can Shape Your Sermons and Connect with Your Congregation*.

Steve Norman is a pastor who has been writing thoughtfully about preaching. In his new book, *The Preacher as Sermon*, published by *Preaching Today*, he shares a mantra for his ministry which is this: "Never underestimate the pain in the room." This evening I don't want to underestimate your pain or the possible pains that you've been going through over the past two years or more. They've been a very difficult two years for many of us. Ministry has not looked the same for any of us.

COVID-19 has been very difficult for all of us. Who taught us in seminary how to preach to a green dot on our computers? How many of us have been struggling with trying to get people

to simply attend church? The fighting over regulations and what's allowed and what's not allowed has worn us out and has hampered our ability to concentrate on ministry. We're grieving; we're mourning.

Many preachers assume that people in the pews are doing fine, because it's not easy to consider the varied forms of suffering in a congregation. But, in fact, Steve Norman's correct in assuming that we should not underestimate the pain in the room. A similar concept was shared by a professor at Denver Seminary where my wife was taking counseling classes when I served as a pastor in Denver. In one of her classes, the professor shared similarly that "People's pain is people's pain." The point is that whether I deem another person's pain to be painful or not, their reality is that they are experiencing pain. So, we should never minimize someone else's pain. We shouldn't say: "Your pain is not as painful as my pain; I'm the only one who understands suffering." Rather, we are to assume that people's pain is people's pain whether we legitimize their pain or not. They are going through some type of suffering in their lives which requires our attention, care, and empathy.

MY STORY

How do we as preachers address the pain in the room? We're currently going through a season of COVID-19 that seems like it will never go away. Since we last saw each other, George Floyd was murdered and many others in our nation. Asian American Pacific Islander hate crimes have risen to an all-time high. Some people tell me that I've never experienced racism in my life because I'm Asian. "You really experience racism? I thought you were like us." The assumption is that Asian Americans do not encounter racism, prejudice or hatred.

Part of my session this evening will be autobiographical in nature sharing some of my own painful moments and chronic issues. I want to encourage you to share in that pain. If it is painful for me, then we all mourn and suffer together. And

something is painful for you, then I want to come alongside and mourn and grieve and lament with you as well.

Ever since COVID happened, racism in my town of Beverly, Massachusetts, toward my family and me has escalated. COVID has ramped up racial hatred and violence. After everything shut down in March of 2020, my three children and I went for a walk in our neighborhood. There's been so much hatred in people's eyes toward people who look like me. So, when we didn't return for over thirty minutes, my wife was scared thinking that something terrible had happened to us. I've experienced racism and prejudice my entire life. It's not new to me. However, I'm more afraid now of racial hatred and violence than I was as a child. Since March of 2020, I haven't gone out for a walk by myself or with my kids. I wonder how many of us could understand what it's like to be a marginalized person in the United States fearing for your safety and the safety of the people you love. It doesn't matter what your credentials are. It doesn't matter if you are a professor or someone who writes books. If you look like me, you are marginalized in the United States of America. Asian American Pacific Islander hate is at an all-time high.

WE ARE SUFFERING

We, as a global society, have also suffered from the loss of lives, loss of jobs, loss of homes, and marriages. So many marriages have ended in divorce in our town just this past year among couples we know. Natural disasters, hurricanes, tornadoes, and flooding. It seems like every week there's another destructive hurricane. For example, Hurricane Ida has taken so many lives and ravaged so many homes and communities. People are devastated today. And what about political division? We can't say enough about that. Impatience and hatred based on our differences; there's no patience today, there's no empathy. Even in our churches, any form of disagreement puts us in the enemy category. Loneliness is at an all-time high. Toxic use of social media. No explanation necessary. Depression, mental illness,

addictions, mandates and restrictions, and there's so much more pain that we could talk about. It has been a very painful last two years.

So, my question to you is this: How are *you* suffering today? And if you would be so bold, I want to ask you, would you please raise your hand if you are suffering in some shape or form? Thank you for raising those hands. We're suffering. The second question is: how is your family suffering? Do we take time to lament and think about this collectively as a family? These are all things that we want to be able to talk about in our time together in the days going forward in this EHS conference on Hope and Lament.

TRAGEDY STRIKES

Let me just take a little bit of time here to share about my life. Some of you may know me, while others don't. I was born and raised in Chicago to wonderful, godly parents, who emigrated from South Korea in the mid '70s. Overall, I grew up well under Christian parents who raised us in the church, who worked multiple jobs to provide for my brothers and me. Up until the time I was 35 or 36, my life was pretty good. I never had any major physical ailments. I did fine in school. I had a good upbringing. My parents valued education and put us through the best schools.

Yet, something happened in my 36th year of life when I began teaching at Gordon-Conwell after pastoring for several years. On the night that I was installed as a faculty member at Gordon-Conwell in March of 2013, I went to play basketball at Gordon College. If you don't know me, basketball is the third love of my life. It goes God, family, and basketball. I've always loved playing basketball. And so, I celebrated joining the faculty at Gordon-Conwell by playing ball. That evening I played with Gordon College and Gordon-Conwell students. In one game, I didn't see the ball being passed to me at full speed and it hit the left side of my head. Knocking me back, I blacked out temporarily but kept on playing because I love the game.

The next morning, I woke up completely dizzy. I knew something had happened because the basketball had struck my head. But, ever since that day, for the last nine plus years, I've battled chronic dizziness. I have post-concussion syndrome that won't go away. From the moment I wake up until I try to go to sleep, I'm dizzy. That's sixteen to seventeen hours a day, every day. Even now as I'm standing here, my brain feels like it's on a boat being tossed in the ocean and I can't control it. There are occasions when my words don't come out or I can't think clearly. As the doctors were trying to figure out my condition, they diagnosed me with glaucoma which is the reason I couldn't see the ball coming toward my head. I had lost significant peripheral vision. Doctors have told me that in cases of long-term post-concussion syndrome: "Patients rarely get better."

On top of the post-concussion syndrome and chronic dizziness, sixteen years ago I was diagnosed with tinnitus. Not only am I dizzy all day, every day, which is very tiring, I have this constant high-pitched ringing in my ears. All day. Every day. And sometimes I confess that I lament to God: "Why this is happening? Why does this continue? Why does this pain continue in my life?" I'm sure, you have something in your life. You have a lament that you're asking of God: "Why God? Why am I going through this suffering?"

Compared to my physical ailments, however, nothing has been more difficult than a tragic event that took place six years ago on November 7, 2015. My youngest brother called me overnight leaving twenty messages on my phone: "Matt, you have to call me back. No matter what time you got to call me back." Unfortunately, my phone was turned off. When I called him back the following morning, he cried: "You're not going to believe this but Tim died in the Philippines." I said, "No, that's not possible, it's probably someone else." "No, Matt, we have to go to the Philippines; Tim is dead." So, immediately, we booked a flight to Manila. On arrival, we were taken to the funeral home and later read the police report claiming that Tim had died in an accident in his apartment complex. However, after a week of investigating their story and the evidence in his building, it was

clear that this was foul play. This was murder. And he was intentionally sought after for his money because he was making ten times the wage of an average Filipino. We went back to the United States, brought his body back, and tried to figure out what really happened. So, we hired private investigators but after a few short weeks the case was closed with no resolution. We continue to grieve, to mourn, to weep, to lament. Tim died the evening he was celebrating his 36th birthday.

If I can just share briefly about Tim's life, Tim was a wonderful brother. He was a Renaissance person, a member of Mensa. Simply brilliant. He had an IQ of 153 which he loved to tell me about. Not only was he highly intelligent, but he was also gifted at sports, popular, creative, inventive, entrepreneurial, there's nothing he couldn't do. But, more than all of that, Tim possessed a heart of gold. He loved God and loved people. I could go on and on telling you the countless stories of how he helped others. My nickname for Tim is the Good Samaritan. He sacrificed much to benefit others. So, why did God take him? And how do we make sense of such tragic events in our lives? As Christians, as people who profess Christ and claim to love God, how do we comprehend our pain?

A PLAN FOR PREACHING ON PAIN

I begin the book by helping us understand the preacher's pain in chapter one. How do we make sense of our own pain as preachers? We're trained to consider others and how to communicate Scripture effectively to them for the coming week. But do we engage introspectively in terms of how we're doing and what are we experiencing today? What are some personal trials? Once we've established that, we can move into the second realm, which is thinking about the listeners. How are they suffering? What are they struggling with as they enter worship?

During my time in pastoral ministry, I had six people sleeping every Sunday during my sermon. It was like clockwork, as soon as I came up to preach, they started closing their eyes. Six people. I knew exactly which six. Yes, it was the same 6, within a

minute, out. I wouldn't see their eyeballs again for thirty to thirty-five minutes. Now, I could get upset that they're sleeping through the preaching of God's Word. But I could also stop to ask: What are they going through? Do I know? Do I think they're bad Christians because they're not listening to my sermon? What hardships weigh them down? I came to find out later that for some of them they had infants, toddlers, young kids, and they didn't sleep the night before. It's like that every Saturday night for them. Again, we want to know the challenges of our people so that we can acknowledge their pain and preach more appropriately to their conditions.

In chapter 3, I offer a plan for preaching to people in pain. How do we demonstrate empathy for others, lament with them, but also show them the hope of the gospel? What is the sermonic action plan? This is covered in detail in chapter 3.

Then, in the second part of the book, I lay out several major challenges for people. People experience pain in their lives because of various factors: decisions, finances, health issues (including mental health), losses, relationships, and yes, I went for it: painful sins in chapter 9.

So, first, let's talk about the preacher's pain. One learning activity that I have my students do in a course called Cultural Exegesis for Preaching is to have them work through a personal timeline. I ask them to chart out their lives in five-year increments (i.e., a tool that I borrowed from Terry Walling). Something I would encourage you to try with your own church members, pastoral staff, or students is to have them consider "What have been the best moments in their lives?" I ask them to map out their lives in five-year periods. The positive moments in life are written above the line and then I ask them to write down any negative things that have happened to them. They write those below the line. We spend about 15 to 20 minutes asking the Holy Spirit to reveal and remind them: "Holy Spirit, will you please help me recall the positive and hurtful moments in my life—even the things that I have repressed?"

Second, I ask them to journal. Some will give me that dirty look, "Oh, don't ask me to journal." But here are four categories

that we can think about: 1) family dysfunction. What family dynamics, issues, generational sins have caused pain in our family? 2) ethnic background is another topic that many people don't talk about. But how has our ethnicity/race contributed to our suffering? 3) We can consider cultural attitudes that have sparked difficulties, and then 4), general pains. I don't read their journals, but they let me know whether they have completed the assignment. Afterwards, many students will say, "This is the first time I've ever thought about these things intentionally." It's a helpful exercise to help them to reflect, to lament, and be honest with themselves in what they've gone through and how this has an impact on their present and future.

SUFFERING IN SCRIPTURE

Now let's shift gears and briefly consider some evidence of pain in Scripture. I used to rehearse this refrain to myself frequently: "Since I serve God, I should be exempt from suffering." Have any of you ever said that? I really did think that. I never expected all the hardships that would come my way.

But we know from Scripture that many people suffered. And this is just a brief snapshot of the sufferers in Scripture. There's Cain and Abel's suffering immediately after the Fall in Genesis 4. Can you imagine the excruciating pain of the first parents, Adam and Eve, at that point? Another story that's not often talked about is Hagar's pain in Genesis 16. There's so much pain there if you dig into that story: the apparent pain of Sarai, the pain of Hagar, the pain of Abram. Later in Genesis, there's Joseph's story of being rejected by his brothers. King David's pain is well-documented some on account of his own sins. The book of Ruth is steeped in pain and so is the book of Job.

Ken Langley will talk tomorrow about the book of Psalms; the Songs of Lament encapsulate around 40% of the Psalter. The Gospels and Epistles record the immeasurable sufferings of our Lord Jesus Christ and Paul's suffering for the sake of Christ which he chronicles especially in 2 Corinthians. And there are numerous other Scripture passages that talk about suffering. So,

the “I serve God so I should be exempt from suffering” excuse does not work. Many who have gone before us in the Bible and afterwards have suffered. And we will continue to suffer. The question is: how do we respond to our suffering?

SHARING IN OUR SUFFERING

Here’s my big idea for this talk: Preach on pain to help your congregants identify and share their suffering in Christian community for the purpose of healing and transformation. I want to be a part of a congregation where we can as the body of Christ freely lament and share our pain together. I don’t want to be a part of a congregation that conceals our issues from one another especially on account of feeling ashamed. What would a church community look like where people were vulnerable and told each other: “This is what I’m going through, would you pray with me? This is my hardship will you encourage me, pray with me, lament with me, cry with me, and remind me of our hope in Christ?” Will you come alongside me, pastor or professor? Will you create a church culture where we can honestly share our pain together so that we can ultimately exalt Christ together? What church could be like if we could be more transparent?

Some of us may be thinking: “I object! I don’t like what’s going on here, Matt, and I don’t care for your ideas. Preaching and pain are oxymorons. They should never go together.” Well, I’ve anticipated some of your objections. Here are some pitfalls when we think about preaching on pain.

PITFALLS FOR PREACHING ON PAIN

It’s an evangelistic turn off. “Hey Sally, how would you like to come to our church for the next six weeks and hear our pastor talk about suffering?” I don’t think Sally would want to come to church with you. Taboo in certain cultures and congregations, pain and suffering are not particularly enjoyable subjects.

Self-disclosure may damage listeners’ faith in God, especially when we talk about our own suffering and pain.

Maybe some people might start to think “I don’t really like the pastor sharing personal struggles from the pulpit.”

Self-disclosure may diminish our pastoral authority. I remember playing basketball with a church member one night and we were just playing one-on-one. He looked over and said, “Pastor Matt, your life must be really hard.” And I asked why. He responded: “You have to be perfect, but I don’t.” Pastors are expected, by some, to be perfect or at least close to it. By way of background, this guy has gone through various struggles with the legal system. If we admit our pain or struggles, people may think less of us.

Self-disclosure focuses the sermon too much on the preacher. “Why are you seemingly the subject of every sermon?”

Self-disclosure can make for repetitive sermons. I know a pastor who lost his child to cancer years ago. And in every sermon that I’ve heard him preach (which is several) he brings up his daughter and what happened to her years ago. Why does he do that? It’s because the pain is still raw even decades later. Of course, it’s hard and it will always be hard. Sometimes self-disclosure makes for repetitive sermons.

BENEFITS OF SELF-DISCLOSURE

I hear your objections. But, let me ask, are there benefits to self-disclosure? Self-disclosure humanizes us. We don’t have to stand on this imaginary platform; we can come down to where the people are and share “I’m a human being just like you. I have my own pain. I have my own struggles.” It humanizes us. I don’t have to be perceived as this perfect pastor on a pedestal.

Self-disclosure also connects us with people and their pain. I preached at a church for a friend of mine a few years ago. This was after my brother’s death. The sermon text lent itself to telling his story. This was pre-COVID and after the service I was about to leave to go to the fellowship hall. A lady came up with tears flooding her eyes. She sobbed saying: “My daughter was murdered two years ago.” And for the next 20 to 30 minutes, I prayed and cried with and for this lady in the sanctuary. Her

words are indelible in my mind, “Thank you, pastor, for sharing about your brother. I never knew that other people went through that kind of tragedy or suffering. And you shared that from the pulpit. Thank you.”

Self-awareness is necessary for good leaders. Some of you may be familiar with the Johari Window. The Johari Window was a tool created in the 1950s to help people with self-awareness. Basically, it forces us to pause and contemplate: “Who do I think I am, and who do other people think I am?” One would circle beliefs about oneself from a list of characteristics. Then others, members in a congregation or students (for our purposes) would also circle from this list concerning what they thought of us. The purpose of this tool is to show us our blind spots. We want to move from these blind spots to complete openness and knowledge about the things that we are good at and the things we struggle with. The problem is when leaders are blind and continue to be blind to leadership struggles and weaknesses. Perhaps, we can incorporate some principles from the Johari Window in our own teaching and preaching.

What are some of the strengths and weaknesses of your students and congregants? How do we help them see and work on some of their blind spots? I don’t know about you, but in every beginning preaching class, students think they’re “A” preachers. They’ve never preached a sermon before, but they all think they’re “A” preachers. Can I get an “Amen”? Receiving an A- is the end of the world for so many of them. You’re just learning the baby steps! You’re not an expert!

Finally, self-disclosure helps us model how to overcome suffering and pain. While many types of suffering will not cease, we can still demonstrate how Christ enables us to live victoriously through suffering and pain. We can try to model for the church what it means to suffer through Christ’s strength.

THE LISTENERS’ PAIN

Now, what about the listeners’ pain? Let’s transition to that important subject by beginning with this question: “Do we love

people?" I would submit to you that pastoring and preaching go together. I had a student in my one of my first preaching classes at the seminary raise his hand, almost triumphantly, and ask: "So, professor, would it be okay if I pursued an itinerant preaching ministry? I know this pastor stuff is, yeah, that's fine. But would you mind if I became an itinerant preacher?" I said, "I don't mind, but why do you want to do that?" And his bold statement was "I love to preach, but I don't like people." I don't know how many of you have had students like this. If we're honest, sometimes we may feel like this. So, my question is: "Do you love people? Do I love people? Do I love to preach but not want to pastor them?"

I tell my students regularly that I don't want them just to become good orators and good communicators. I want them to become good pastors. I want them to love their people. I don't know whether that student felt rebuked by me or not. Some people respond like Snoopy in this cartoon telling themselves: "I don't have time to worry about who doesn't like me; I'm too busy loving the people who love me." It's easy to do being surrounded by people we like, but those who are difficult, we marginalize and put to the side because we don't have time for them or want to deal with them. This attitude affects all of us at various times in our ministry and teaching.

FOUR MAJOR TYPES OF SUFFERING

Here are four major categories of suffering: 1) suffering for the sake of Christ; 2) suffering from various illnesses out of our control; 3) suffering because of demands placed on us; and 4) suffering from our own sinfulness, desires, and poor choices. Now there are many other types of suffering, but here are some major categories that I see in our lives that we can address as pastors and preachers.

In addition, here are other common categories of pain: physical health, mental health, relational health, economic health, and spiritual health. These are all important matters to consider. Some of you may be saying to yourselves, "Well, isn't

Jesus enough? Isn't the gospel enough?" And I would agree, "Yes, wholeheartedly, I believe that's true." Jesus is enough and the gospel is enough. Jesus is the answer to every human problem and predicament, including sin. Here's the issue: many Christians don't know how to handle their problems and predicaments right now. I can preach the strongest sermon about the gospel and about who Christ is, explaining and reminding them of the centrality of Christ. I can exalt Christ all I want in my sermons. But if people don't know or understand how to deal with their immediate struggles or at least have them acknowledged by the preacher, how will they come to know the Savior, who seemingly doesn't understand their problems or their pain?

JESUS TOUCHES THE PEOPLE'S PAIN

I'm wholeheartedly for Christ-centered preaching. I am wholeheartedly in favor of gospel-centered preaching *and* talking to people about their current struggles. Why is that? Because Jesus modeled that for us. I studied the gospels and found that time and time again Jesus met people's immediate needs. Here are some examples of passages where Jesus cared for people holistically. This list is essentially exhaustive because there are many passages in the Synoptics that overlap.

So, what did Jesus do? Jesus healed the sick, healed the leper (and here are the references in the PowerPoint slides), healed the centurion's servant, healed Peter's mother-in-law, restored the demon-possessed man, forgave and healed the paralytic, raised a dead girl and healed a sick woman, raised the widow's son, healed the blind and the mute, instructed the disciples to heal the sick, raised the dead, cleansed lepers, drove out demons, fed the five thousand, delivered the demon possessed, fed the four thousand, healed the demon-possessed boy, healed the crippled woman on the Sabbath, healed the ten lepers, healed the two blind men, healed the man born blind, and raised Lazarus from the dead.

Jesus' formula was asking those in need: "What can I do for you?" He reached out his hand and touched those who were sick. He didn't ask: "What's your problem?" and then immediately offer a solution such as: "Yes, I know what your problem is. You have a spiritual problem; you have a sin problem; and I'm going to solve it." No, he inquired: "What can I do for you?" It was open-ended. They could ask for whatever their heart's desired.

For instance, hear this exchange between Blind Bartimaeus and Jesus from Mark's Gospel. Blind Bartimaeus screamed: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" "What do you want me to do for you?" "I want to see." Jesus met physical needs first and then extended salvation. I wonder if we can replicate Jesus's philosophy of ministry. Yes, I want to urgently preach the gospel. I want to give them Christ. But I also want to give them something that they need, which is responding to their immediate pain and suffering.

I submit to you this evening that Jesus cares for the whole person. And that's why everything matters in ministry: that's why soup kitchens, caring for the least of these, housing the homeless, meeting people's physical needs all matter. Jesus even said it in Matthew 25, "Even if you give a cup of water to someone, you're doing this unto me." Since Jesus cares for the whole person, I want to encourage all of us to care for whole people, too.

PREACHING ON SUFFERING

How do we respond? We can preach to expect suffering. This is radical; I know some of you are thinking, "You're not going to grow a church like this, Matt." Preach to expect suffering. Preach to lower people's expectations about this earthly life and about what they can accomplish. Preach that they're not going to achieve or attain everything that they want in life. Preach against entitlement and ingratitude. Preach a big God and small problems.

For this last one, would you please do an exercise with me? Place your hand in front of your eyes. I can't take credit for this activity because I'm just copying what that person did. Put your hand in front of your face. Can you see much beyond your hand? The hand represents your problems. When we preach like this, when we preach that our problems are so big (like our hand), then we forget that we need to preach about a big God, because we can't see much beyond the problem or crisis. In addition, preach lament without an immediately happy ending.

We're so quick to give the solution of Jesus. The Sunday school answer is Jesus. This happens in our church where my wife teaches children from the Bible. One of the kids, if the answer is Jesus, will always raise her hand because she knows that the correct answer is Jesus. And yet, can we have the courage to linger in lament with our people and acknowledge their trials? We don't always have to give them a quick solution. As pastors, we have this tendency. Perhaps, we need a culture shift where in Christian community we just sit and hear people's pain and let them tell their story. Going further, preach for spiritual maturity. This shaping and pruning of God increases our discipleship and enables us to become more Christlike.

Ultimately, of course, we preach the gospel. The gospel is steeped in pain but rich in hope. We preach Christ: his death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and return. The gospel is painful but also hopeful. How do we help our people understand the fullness of the gospel? How do we respond to their pain?

QUESTIONS FOR PREACHING ON PAIN

So, here are some questions we might consider before preaching on pain.

- Which passage will I preach on regarding the subject of pain?
- Does every sermon need to address pain? No, absolutely not.

-
- Which type of pain and suffering is revealed in the text? (If there's a moment of pain that I can address from this passage, why not take some time in the sermon to talk about it.)
 - How does the Bible character or biblical author deal with the pain?
 - How does this pain in the text relate to our listeners' pain? (This is where we're connecting pain in Scripture to current listeners' pains.)
 - What does this pain say about God and his allowance of pain? (This question is geared toward skeptics who ask: "If God really loves me, why does he allow this in my life?")
 - How does the Triune God help us in our suffering?
 - How can our preaching show care and empathy?
 - How can we share this pain in Christian community? (Where do we see type of this communal care in the Bible? We want to be an Acts 2 kind of church, where we see the needs of others and care for them.)
 - Finally, how will God use suffering to transform us and bring himself glory?

These are some of the homiletical queries of a preacher who preaches to people in pain. We walk through these questions and determine: Does my text talk about these things? Again, I don't submit to you that every sermon needs to talk about pain. Of course not.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES FOR PREACHING ON PAIN

Additionally, here are some general principles:

1. Diagnose the source of the pain. What's going on in people's lives?
2. Preach on pain when the text addresses it.
3. Preach on pain when the occasion calls for it.
4. Help listeners receive comfort from God.
5. Encourage listeners to comfort others in their pain.
6. Give thanks to God in the midst of pain (radical but necessary).
7. Urge listeners to glorify God through their pain.

These are some principles we can incorporate as we try to preach effectively on the difficult subject of pain and suffering. From the pulpit, we can increase our empathy for others. Our society lacks empathy. People don't have empathy for anyone. A gentle reminder is that: Everyone has a story. The question is, "Will I sit long enough to listen to it?" Preaching to people in pain may take a lot of time. As homileticians and pastors, we have papers to grade, meetings to lead, people to minister to, sermons to write and preach, and Bible studies to prepare. When do we have time to listen to peoples' stories? Remember, everyone has a story.

PECULIAR PEOPLE HAVE STORIES

I had a church member of whom I thought was very strange. Anybody have a church member or two of whom you think: "They're *really* strange!"? This strange person would come over to the parsonage every Tuesday evening for the women's small

group led by my wife. This person was a different, peculiar kind of person. She would prance and dance through the kitchen. One evening I saw her in my kids' rooms taking out the toys and playing with them. I kept thinking: "This person is very, very, strange." She would say some immature things, at times. She was direct, blunt, some may consider even rude. Perhaps, most strange of all, she knew Greek and Hebrew better than I did. She had studied the original languages on her own. She loved the Word of God. So, you have this person who knows Greek and Hebrew better than I do, and yet is prancing and dancing around the kitchen, and playing with my kid's toys.

My questions abounded: Why is she like this? Why is she so different? One day, I finally managed to ask her: "Can you tell me about your life?" She said, "Oh yeah, sure. What do you want to know? "Well, what was your childhood like?"

When I was a child, my mom and dad were killed in an accident. I basically raised myself for the last thirty some years." As she continued to talk, it hit me: she's still a young girl at times mentally, because she lost her parents at a tragically young age. She's never been able to move mentally past that part of her life. She still plays enthusiastically with my kid's toys and finds them fascinating because she didn't fully experience childhood.

Once I heard her story, not only did I weep with her, but I also began to treat her like royalty. She eventually became a wonderful ministry partner and I considered her a valuable church member and not just someone who was rude and childish. On my last Sunday, I shared with her how much I valued her as a ministry colleague and friend. Here's a person who's broken, and here I am someone who has lived a rather privileged life. I had two godly parents who loved me and provided for me. And here's this sister in Christ who's raised herself. When we hear someone's story, it changes how we view them—usually for the better.

CONCLUSION

Everyone has a story. Everyone has pain. Everyone can use their suffering to bless others particularly when we've been able to process our pain. As we think about our growing divisions in this country and around the world, I want to encourage us to grow in empathy. I want to encourage us as God's people, and especially as leaders in the church, and leaders of seminaries, to lead the charge in learning to empathize with other people. Empathy takes a lot of time and heart work: it's where we ask the Holy Spirit, "Help me, Lord, to understand another person's life."

Yes, these are difficult topics: ethnicity and race, politics, people's differing views on mandates and restrictions. These are real things in the church that are dividing us: denominational issues and women in ministry. These are at the core of some of our greatest divisions as Christians. But will we listen to other people's stories? Will we hear, learn, and try to understand why they came to think as they do?

Here are two reminders: First, all preaching is pastoral. I want to encourage us to preach with our presence just as much as we preach an eloquent, masterful sermon on suffering or whatever the topic may be. What listeners also want from us is our presence, for us to sit with them, to listen to their stories, to hear their pain. So, preach with your pastoral presence.

Second, pain comes in waves. Just yesterday, I wept because it was my deceased younger brother's birthday who was born on November 3, 1979. Though it's been six years since his death, I still see his body lying in the casket. Pain comes in waves.

But there is hope. God is with us in our suffering. And as much as we lament to God, we also serve the same eternal God who loves us and cares for us. And there is more to this world than just this earthly, temporal life. We live with our gaze toward Christ and eternity with him. These are good reminders. These are words of hope that we can share with our church members and with our students.

I conclude with a quote from Wally Amos Criswell, better known as W. A. Criswell, once the pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas. He writes in *Standing on the Promises*:

There is only one joy greater than preaching or teaching the Word, and that joy is this: One day soon we will see the Author of the Word face to face. God Himself will hold us in His arms and take us home. In the meantime, all He asks of us is that we go on loving the Word and sharing it in our own ways, that we remain faithful to the Word, that we win the lost to Christ. And when our trials come, when we feel pain and suffering, when our tears flow again, it is our joy and comfort to lift our faces heavenward and to go on standing on the promises of God.¹

We serve a great and glorious God. That is our hope, and until we see Jesus, face to face, we can pray this prayer by the Puritan Robert Hawker. Will you pray with me?

So when my poor heart is afflicted, when Satan storms, or the world frowns, when I suffer sickness, or when all your waves and storms seem to go over me, what relief it is to know that you, Jesus, see me. And that you care!

So help me, Lord, to look to you, and remember you. And oh! That blessed Scripture: "In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old."²

Come quickly, Lord Jesus. Amen.

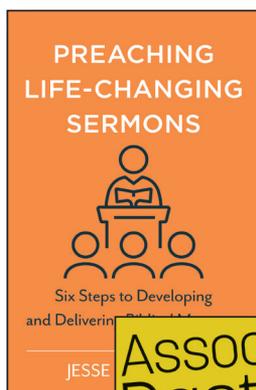
NOTES

1. W. A. Criswell, *Standing on the Promises* (Dallas: Word, 1990), 248-250.

2. Robert Hawker, "A Prayer in Time of Suffering," Lexham Press (blog), March 20, 2020, <https://blog.lexhampress.com/2020/03/20/a-prayer-in-time-of-suffering>. The Bible verse Hawker quotes is Isa. 63:9. The language in the prayer has been updated for a modern audience.

New Resources for Pastors and Ministry Leaders

FAITHFUL BOOKS ENGAGED WITH THE ACADEMY & CULTURE



PREACHING LIFE-CHANGING SERMONS

Six Steps to Developing and Delivering Biblical Messages

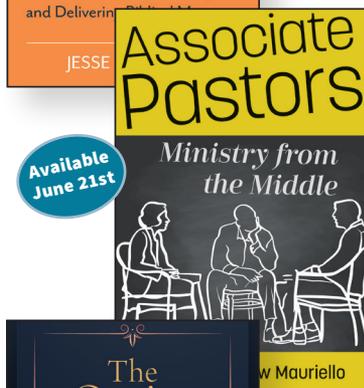
Jesse L. Nelson

“The various examples provided and encouragement gained from reading and practicing the wisdom found in these pages will set any preacher on a path to preaching power.”

—SCOTT M. GIBSON,

Baylor University’s Truett Seminary

\$16.99 • 144 pages • ISBN 978-0-8254-4695-5



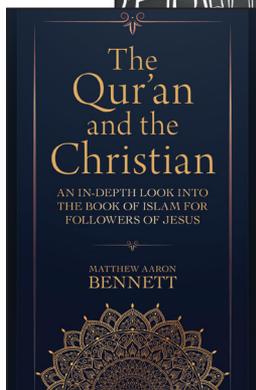
ASSOCIATE PASTORS

Ministry from the Middle
Michael Matthew Mauriello

“Dr. Mauriello has written a thoughtful and well-researched guide for associate pastors who want to understand the dynamics and strategic advantages of their role. He not only understands the position, but he can help pastors serve effectively from the middle seat.”

—LEE ECLOV, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, PreachingToday.com

\$20.99 • 240 pages • ISBN 978-0-8254-4744-0



THE QUR'AN AND THE CHRISTIAN

An In-Depth Look at Islam for Followers of Jesus
Matthew Aaron Bennett

“Matthew Bennett provides a trustworthy guide for the church to understand the Qur’an which is the key to evangelizing Muslims for Christ. I wholeheartedly recommend that each missionary, pastor and layman interested in understanding and reaching Muslims for Jesus, read this outstanding book.”

—ROBIN DALE HADAWAY, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

\$19.99 • 256 pages • ISBN 978-0-8254-4708-2



Subscribe to our newsletter!
Kregel.com/academic

Available at retailers or from Kregel directly
Phone: 800-733-2607 | Email: customerservice@kregel.com