

Group Notes

Texts: Mark 4.1-20; Mark 14.27-31

Safety and Comfort

Context and Background

Context (Parable): Jesus' parable about the sower and soils is the first parable found in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus used this parable to indicate both why he taught in parables and the importance of hearing and responding appropriately to his teaching. The main point of the parable concerns hearing. Hearing, in this context, involves more than listening but listening and engaging with what Jesus is saying. In this parable, Jesus described four different ways of hearing and responding to his words. The second way of hearing involves receiving the words of Jesus in part and not as a whole. This one receives the words of Jesus as they refer to renewal and blessing. However, this person does not accept the words of Jesus as they address the reality and role of suffering in life. The outcome of such a response is a falling away or stumbling in one's faith.

Background (Pain and Suffering): Pain and suffering are a normal part of the human experience and may come from a number of sources and causes. In Scripture, one finds three main sources of pain and suffering. First, pain and suffering are brought about as a consequence of the corruption of creation and human nature due to the Fall, the initial sin of people (Gen. 3). Because of people's initial and continual rejection of God, all of creation is subject to suffering and turmoil, the normal outworking of life lived apart from God (Gen. 3.16-19; Rom. 8.18-21). Second, pain and suffering are brought about by the work of Satan. At points in the human experience, for reasons we do not fully understand, Satan is allowed to tempt and torment people as a means of testing their faithfulness to God (Job 1-2). Finally, pain and suffering are part of the experience of following Jesus. The authors of the New Testament refer to this reality as "sharing in the sufferings of Christ." The basic reality is that those who have chosen to follow Jesus find that life is not free from pain and suffering. Rather, they find that following Jesus involves the experience of pain and suffering, at times intense suffering. Jesus himself spoke of this reality in his call of discipleship (Luke 9.22-25; Matt. 5.10-12). Peter, drawing from the Old Testament prophets, explained that the experience of suffering was necessary for it was part of the process of becoming like Jesus (1 Pet. 4.1-2). See also Is. 51-52. In this passage, God moves to redeem Israel. However, the process of redemption is brought about with the experience of ruin/brokenness. Is. 52.9). Paul and the author of Hebrews noted that the experience of suffering and pain was the natural outcome of remaining faithful to Jesus, simply a part of being like Jesus who himself suffered (Rom. 8.14-17; Heb. 4.14-5.10, 10.19-25). In their understanding, the ministry of Jesus involved suffering, suffering both for who he was and suffering to accomplish God's task for him. In the same way, Jesus-followers should expect to suffer, both for who they are and to accomplish what God has called them to do. Jesus himself may allude to this in the last supper. As he breaks bread and passes the cup, he calls his disciples to "do this in remembrance of me" (1 Cor. 11.23-26; Luke 22.19). While we have interpreted this as the institution of a practice of the Church, the Lord's Supper, Jesus in fact may have been calling his disciples not just to form a new religious practice but also a new way of life, a life that was broken and poured out for others.

The Text

The reality of pain and suffering (Mark 4.3, 5-6, 16-17): Jesus notes that following him leads to the experience of pain and suffering. Following him holds no promise for an easy life, a life of blessing alone. Instead, following Jesus is an invitation to a life of the cross, a life of grit and sweat (See *Pain and Suffering*). Some, however, are not ready to receive this calling. Instead, they have chosen to follow Jesus thinking in some way they are either avoiding the normal experience of pain and suffering, or are in some way thinking that such experiences would be lessened rather than magnified. In the face of hardship and trials, they shrink back and fall away. That is, they come to the end of their growth as a follower of Jesus or cease to follow Jesus altogether. They find that they do not have a root that goes deep enough (faith) to sustain them.

The reality of falling away (Mark 14.27-31): Inasmuch as pain and suffering are part of the experience of following Jesus, so too is the experience of stumbling at points. As Jesus prepared his disciples for his own experience of suffering upon the cross, he told them that they would all fall away and abandon him. With this statement, Jesus indicated both the experience of trouble and the response to such trouble, a stumbling by the disciples. The disciples, however, disagreed with Jesus. They indicated their steadfast faithfulness in the face of all hardship, including death (Mark 14.31). Peter, the loudest of these dissenting voices, declared that he alone would never stumble (Mark 14.29). However, Jesus' words proved to be true. In the face of suffering and hardship, each of the disciples stumbled (Mark 14.43-52). Peter, in spite of his bold predictions, disowned Jesus (Mark 14.66-72).

Hope for those who stumble (Mark 14.27-31): While Jesus indicates that both suffering and stumbling are part of the Christian experience, he also indicates that restoration is also part of this experience. In the same breath, Jesus addresses the stumbling and restoration of the disciples (Mark 14.28). Jesus knows that they will stumble, but for those that remain faithful, for those that continue to follow him, he will be found waiting, ready to offer restoration. This restoration is seen beautifully in John 21.15-19. The key to this restoration seems to be the continued presence of faith in the face of suffering and subsequent stumbling.

Application: Those of us who follow Jesus will suffer. We will experience hardship and trial, partly because we live in a broken world and partly because following Jesus means we have chosen to live the way of the cross. We have chosen a way that involves suffering as part of the process of life transformation and the outcome of giving our lives to reach others for God's Kingdom (See *Pain and Suffering*). Along the way, we will not be perfect in our followship. At times we will stumble. Such stumbling can come because we are not expecting suffering or because we think we are greater than that which besets us. Whatever the reason, the outcome of our stumbling is often remorse and guilt (Mark 14.72). This falling can mean the end of our faith journey (Hebrews 6.4-12), but it does not have to end this way. For those of us who maintain our faith, for those who are willing to push forward and continue to draw near to God and hope in Him (Hebrews 10.19-25), restoration is waiting (Mark 14.28; John 21.15-19). We follow one who understands suffering for he too has experienced it (Hebrews 4.14-5.10). He is patient with us, knowing our weakness. He offers his strength and his joy in the face of sorrow, if we will but draw near to him. Or, in the words of Jesus' parable, if we will but listen.

Traffic: What's driving your life?

Discussion Guide 3

Mark 4.1-20; 14.27-31

Getting Started: 10 minutes

- In what ways, if any, have you ever wrestled with the presence of pain and suffering?

Diving Into the Text: 60 minutes *(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)*

Setting the Stage: *"No pain. No gain." So goes the saying. I prefer another saying, "No pain is fine with me." Let's be honest, the thought of experiencing anything that might bring trouble, sorrow, or suffering my way is not at the top of my wish list. In fact, the top of my wish list has things that help me avoid pain and suffering, things that bring me comfort and safety. When I find myself in the midst of trouble, in a painful bind, then the first thing I do is try to get out of it. I am not alone. We live in a pain avoidance culture. We do everything we can to live lives of peace and safety. When things get touchy we pop a pill, pray for release, or point a finger in blame. We'll do whatever it takes to make ourselves feel better. It feels right, no pain that is. The problem is that it isn't. Jesus plainly says that suffering is a part of life, part of a life following him. That stinks, because the only way I am going to make it through is if I hold to him, if I reach out to the one that is stronger than me. If I am going to live anything other than a life of peace and safety then I need some help. I can't do this on my own. I am going to have to reach out to God. Maybe, that is the point.*

- Jesus indicates in his parable that the experience of pain and suffering is part of the experience of following him. How is this insight to life eye-opening? In what ways, if any, is it troubling? (Note: *We live in a pain avoidance culture. Thus, we struggle to comprehend and articulate Jesus' words in our own context. You might consider using the article on Pain and Suffering found in the group notes to facilitate this discussion.*)
- How might the reality of Jesus' words play out in our own lives? (Note: *We often think negatively here. For example, our minds leap to rejection, imprisonment, or insults. While they are a reality, they are rare in our own context. Think how pain and suffering might come through sacrifice, denial, the practice of forgiveness, etc.*)
- Why might faith, a deep devotion to and orientation around God, be necessary when facing pain and suffering?
- What might happen when one faces pain and suffering without faith? Where have you seen this? How have you seen it in your own life?
- In the *Next Steps*, Pastor Blake provided a list of steps involved in a faith response in the face of pain and suffering. With which, if any, do you resonate? Struggle?
 - Accept pain and suffering as a part of the life of faith and imitation of Jesus (Luke 9.22-25; 1 Peter 4.1-2; Rom. 8.14-17)
 - Acknowledge one's limited strength and accept God's unlimited strength (2 Cor. 12.10)
 - Accept God's grace as sufficient for life (2 Cor. 12.9)
 - Draw near to God and hold to hope in Him (Heb. 10.19-25)
 - Meet with fellow believers for mutual encouragement and strength (Heb. 10.19-25)
- At points we all stumble in the face of pain and suffering. Jesus offers restoration for those who continue in faith. How does this make you feel? In what ways do you hear God calling you to respond?
- Break into pairs or threes to pray. Pray for faith, strength, and restoration in the face of pain and suffering.

Wrapping Up: 20 minutes

- Prayer requests
- Group Prayer time
- House-keeping matters (assignments for the next meeting)