



Meeting God in Pain and Suffering

Overview

Jesus once said, “In this world you will have trouble.” Pain and suffering are inevitable in this life. Often, when we begin to practice the disciplines, the unhealed wounds of a lifetime rise to the surface of our hearts. Everything in us wants to run in the opposite direction — to deny, detach, or drug our pain. But the invitation of Jesus is to meet him *in* our pain, and let it become the crucible of our formation.

Practice reflection

Before we begin Session 05, break up into small groups and share your reflections on last session’s practice of Sabbath.

- 01 **What was challenging about your Sabbath practice?**
- 02 **Where did you feel delight in your practice?**
- 03 **Where did you most experience God’s nearness?**
- 04 **Is there anything different you would like to try related to the practice of Sabbath?**

Teaching

Scripture

Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.” Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”

—Matthew 26:36-39

Session summary

- The practices are not a religious formula to habit-stack our way into spiritual formation.
- When we slow down and come to quiet before God, often the first thing that comes up is emotional pain, as our soul begins to process and discharge all the pain and suffering of our life.
- There are three primary ways people deal with pain:
 - Deny
 - Detach
 - Drug
- The Jesus way is to meet God in our pain.
- Left unhealed, emotional pain can sabotage our transformation. But if we open it to God, it can become the secret to our transformation.

Spiritual bypassing

A tendency to use spiritual ideas and practices to sidestep or avoid facing unresolved emotional issues, psychological wounds, and unfinished developmental tasks*.

Emotional maturity

You’re aware of your feelings, but you’re not run by your feelings.

Spiritual maturity

The ability and willingness to know and do the will of God.

* John Welwood, “Principles of Inner Work: Psychological and Spiritual,” *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 16, no. 1 (1984).

Discussion questions

Pause the video and take some time to process together as a community.

Here are some questions for discussion:

- 01 Can you tell one story of a painful experience you've been through that has been used for good in your formation?

- 02 How have you experienced God in times of pain and suffering?

- 03 Which of the three responses to emotional pain are you most inclined toward: deny, detach, or drug? What has that looked like in your life?

- 04 What could it look like for you to reorient yourself to the pain in your life as an opportunity to be formed by God?

After the video

Closing prayer

End your time together by praying this liturgy:

God of Gethsemane, who experiences
and knows the pain of our condition,
help us turn to you in the ache of our emotions
when the day has turned to darkness,
that we may know the liberation of your
transforming love, not only by the calm
waters' edge, but when we're traveling on
the waters of the storms that life brings.
Amen.

OPTIONAL

If you'd like to continue your conversation, here are some additional questions for reflection:

- 01 How familiar are you with noticing and naming your feelings?
- 02 As you consider the spiritual exercise of noticing and naming your feelings in prayer, what comes up for you?
- 03 Come up with a plan for your practice this week. When will you try the exercise?

Practice

Noticing and naming your emotions

Let's put this teaching into practice, so that what we're learning can become part of who we are.

The journey into emotional health involves learning to notice and name our emotions in the presence of God.

When we notice and name our feelings, they have less power over us. If you were to name a painful emotion like fear, anger, disappointment, or jealousy, a brain scan would show that your very act of naming it helps to process and quiet that emotion.

This is why psychiatrist Dan Siegel encourages us to "name it to tame it."

This session's spiritual exercise is a simple template for prayer designed to notice and name your feelings and offer them to God in prayer.

- Find a quiet, distraction-free place and time.
- Put away your phone or any devices, and settle into a comfortable but alert position.
- Take a few minutes to breathe and center your awareness in God's presence. And then do the following:

01 Notice: Now that you are centered in your body and in God, begin to let yourself feel. Let whatever is in you come up. Just notice it. Don't fight it or run away from it or feel guilty about it or judge it — just notice it. Let the feeling be.

02 Name: Then name the emotion and be as specific as possible. You may want to use the following list of emotions. Just pick out one to three words from the Feelings list on the following page that put language to what you're experiencing in your body.

03 Feel: Just sit in those feelings. Sink into them. Normally, we turn away from them and run in the opposite direction. Instead, turn and face them, like you would an ocean wave, and let it wash over you and then pass you by.

04 Offer it to God: Remember and follow Jesus' Gethsemane Prayer.

- Give God your feelings — Tell him what you are feeling, with no filter.
- Give God your desires — Tell him what you really want, good or bad.
- Give God your trust — Surrender your heart again to him. Stop grasping for control and yield yourself to God and his will for your life. You may want to pray Jesus' own prayer, "Not my will, but yours be done."

You can do this exercise one time before the next session, or every day. It's also an exercise you can practice for the rest of your life, to open deeper and deeper parts of your inner world to God.

Feelings list*

Happy

Admired
 Alive
 Appreciated
 Assured
 Cheerful
 Confident
 Content
 Delighted
 Determined
 Estatic
 Elated
 Encouraged
 Energized
 Enthusiastic
 Excited
 Exuberant
 Flattered
 Fortunate
 Fulfilled

Sad

Alienated
 Ashamed
 Burdened
 Condemned
 Crushed
 Defeated
 Dejected
 Demoralized
 Depressed
 Deserted
 Despised
 Devastated
 Disappointed
 Discarded
 Discouraged
 Disgraced
 Disheartened
 Disillusioned
 Dismal

Angry

Abused
 Aggravated
 Agitated
 Anguished
 Annoyed
 Betrayed
 Cheated
 Coerced
 Controlled
 Deceived
 Disgusted
 Dismayed
 Displeased
 Dominated
 Enraged
 Exasperated
 Exploited
 Frustrated
 Fuming

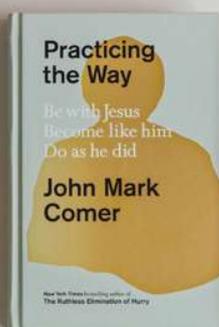
Scared

Afraid
 Alarmed
 Anxious
 Appalled
 Apprehensive
 Awed
 Concerned
 Defensive
 Desperate
 Doubtful
 Fearful
 Frantic
 Full of Dread
 Guarded
 Horrified
 Impatient
 Insecure
 Intimidated
 Nervous

Confused

Ambivalent
 Awkward
 Baffled
 Bewildered
 Bothered
 Constricted
 Directionless
 Disorganized
 Distracted
 Doubtful
 Flustered
 Foggy
 Hesitant
 Immobilized
 Misunderstood
 Perplexed
 Puzzled
 Stagnant
 Surprised

* <https://www.ndapandas.org/wp-content/uploads/archive/Documents/News/FeelingsWordList.pdf>



This session's reading

For this session, we're reading "How? A Rule of Life," in *Practicing the Way* by John Mark Comer, pp. 156-205.

Resources to go deeper

If you're interested in growing even more in your practice of meeting God in pain and suffering, here are some more resources to consider.

Recommended reading

- *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* by Pete Scazzero
- *Untangle Your Emotions* by Jennie Allen
- *The Human Condition* by Thomas Keating

Recommended listening

- **The Emotionally Healthy Discipleship Course** link.practicingtheway.org/course-s5
- In This World You Will Have Trouble teaching series from Bridgetown Church:
bridgetown.church/series/in-this-world



Guest bio

Our guest this session was Hakeem Bradley. Hakeem is a speaker, pastor, and teacher, and is on the scholarship team at BibleProject, a nonprofit organization committed to creating digital resources that explore the Bible as a unified story that points to Jesus. To learn more about Hakeem, visit hakeembradley.com.

