



HURT

AT CHURCH

EXPLORING THE PAIN



Biblical Counselling^{UK}



Hurt at Church: Exploring the Pain © Biblical Counselling UK

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Introduction

Church is designed to be a community of hope – a community where there is love and encouragement to spur us on in our walk with Christ. Church is God’s very good idea. And, yet, it can be a place of pain.

For all of us there are tensions and irritations as we rub shoulders with fellow forgiven sinners. For some of us the pain goes much deeper than that. Maybe there has been betrayal, relationship breakdown, harsh words, manipulation, coercion or control. Maybe the hurt at church you have experienced could appropriately be described as “abuse”.

Wherever our experiences are on the spectrum of suffering, the Lord sees and He cares. He knows what we have been through and is with us in the pain. He is not unmoved by the injustices and hurts we have endured. He also sees what is going on in our hearts. The tendency to run and hide – or fight hard – or to withdraw into bitterness or despair.

God’s love is so deep. He is the God who binds up the broken hearted – who promises to work in the lives of those He has chosen, to bring hope. His Spirit is active now. He is calling us to turn to him and walk with him through this period of suffering.

It is our hope and prayer that these short resources can be a companion for that journey. It is not a resource to be rushed. What follows are 10 sections based on common questions that are designed to help you process your pain with the Lord. Each section looks at one facet of church hurt and contains an introduction, some reflection / discussion questions, a Bible passage and an invitation to respond.

The resources can be used as a private devotional – the basis of a group discussion – or a guide for you to talk over with a friend. Feel free to work through whichever questions feel most apt in whatever order you choose. You might want to spend weeks on some questions – there is no hurry. The aim is to talk honestly, process biblically and, in the process, help yourself (and others) to walk faithfully through this difficult time. This resource may not be all you need to help you walk this difficult path but we pray that it will help you take the next step.

Session 1

I can't find the words for what's happened. Where do I start?

Introduction

It is sometimes hard to know what we feel about the hurt we have experienced. The memories may feel muddled. Maybe we have a sense of unease, dis-ease, but we cannot put words to it well. It is worth pausing to give yourself time to consider what you know - to think back and recall some significant moments. There is no need to force yourself to remember the hardest things - or to dwell on the incidents for long - but remembering and naming can be a valuable part of processing before the Lord.

Reflect

Write down 3 things - events or conversations - that seem significant as you look back over your story of hurt.

One: _____

Two: _____

Three: _____

What can you remember about your responses at the time?

Thoughts: _____

Feelings: _____

Actions: _____

How do you feel now as you notice those things and pause to think about them?

Living by faith means relating rightly to the Lord. The Psalms help us see what faith looks like in words. They provide a step to start speaking to Him. In Psalm 62, we find King David ill at ease. He encourages himself to find relief and peace in the Lord God.

Focus

Read Psalm 62.

How does the psalm describe David's experience?

David reminds himself of who God is. How does he describe God? Which idea or image seems most vivid to you? What does it remind you of?

Once he has remembered God, what does David do and say?

As one of God's people today, who is listening in on God's word to all His people, what do you think it means to 'pour out your hearts to Him'?

Write - speak - pray

Spend a few moments turning to the Lord in prayer - remembering who he is, telling him some of your hurts. Aim to use some of the metaphors in the Psalm and/or some of the words of the Psalm to help you articulate your pain.

Session 2

What does God say about what's happened? What does God say about church culture?

Introduction

Nothing is out of God's sight. In all of history and all that is to come, he has not missed a single thing. He is omniscient. He is compassionate towards those who have been wronged. He has something to say on how all things will be put right.

Reflect

What is your first thought about where God has been in relation to all that has gone on at church? What does it seem like He has been up to? Loving? Inactive? Tender? Providing? Distant? Leading? Or something else.

It is likely that different people will have differing views on what has occurred in your church. What things have others said, about the behaviours or incidents that have been happening? Where do their descriptions differ from yours?

Whether it has been described as 'just different personalities', 'strong leadership' or 'simply a difficult phase of church life', the Lord God has a particular concern for things that aren't right. Whether it was a one-off unwise response or a pattern of persistent sinful responses, He is concerned about the misuse of power, over-use of control or any other cause of pain.

Focus

The Bible uses the word 'oppression'. It is spoken of next to 'arrogance' and 'deceit'.

Its impact is 'misery' and 'calamity' and 'wasting away' (Psalm 73; Isaiah 30; Deuteronomy 26; Psalm 107; Hosea 8:10). These may be helpful terms to describe what some of us have been through. Such things matter to the Lord. The writer of Ecclesiastes helps us know God's view.

Read Ecclesiastes 4:1-3

What does the writer see 'under the sun'?

What does the writer conclude?

How does this passage sum up misuse of power?

God does not condone the sin that has brought you pain. He sees the isolation that you may have been feeling. The powerlessness that maybe is your experience.
What questions are you left with about how the Lord sees these things?

Write - speak - pray

It may be that you have some questions for the Lord - you can write them and speak them out to him now. It may be that you want to thank him for seeing your pain and not ignoring the sins committed. It may be that you want to lament the prevalence of pain in the world, in the church, in your life. You can pour out your heart to him now.

Session 3

What does faith mean now? How do I know if I'm still a Christian? What does it look like to have faith again?

Introduction

There is a strong connection between our faith and our church family. As the Lord reconciled each of us to Him through Christ Jesus, so He joined us together as a 'holy temple in the Lord ... built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit... one body' (Ephesians 2:21,22, 16). It's not surprising that the brokenness of deep hurt in the 'body' often leads us to feel broken in what we believed in the first place.

Reflect

What do you notice about the way your individual faith relates to the 'body', the church? (List the positive and negative ways your church community have impacted your faith).

How would you describe your relationships to your church family now? (Whether you have remained in the church where there has been hurt or are in a new church setting.)

What parts of your faith feels broken or shattered now?

Paul writes to the Colossians about the completeness of life in Christ Jesus. He retells the good news they have built their faith on. Colossians 2:12 says ‘...you were raised with [Christ] through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead’.

Focus

When did you first ‘hear’ and ‘truly understand God’s grace’ (Colossians 1:6) and the message about Christ Jesus’ rescue of us?

Read Colossians 3:1-3

What does Colossians 3:1-3 say about where we are and where Christ Jesus is? (see also John 6:39-40). How does the life, death and resurrection of Jesus provide a concrete foundation for this verse?

What comes to mind as you chew over the phrase ‘hidden with Christ in God’?

Paul draws out some implications about our hearts – ‘set your hearts on things above’, he says. As we pour out our hearts to the Lord, what might setting them on ‘things above’ look like?

Write – speak – pray

Spend some time thanking the Lord for what he has done. You might like to talk about your relationship with him. Maybe you could acknowledge where your heart sometimes leans and ask for His help to set your heart on Him.

Session 4

What about the people I've left behind, who don't understand why I left or don't want to talk about it? How do I move forward where resolution isn't possible?

Introduction

You don't want to stop loving close friends. You still want to catch up from time-to-time but the elephant in the room is always there. And not far under-the-surface is confusion, feeling betrayed, maybe anger. Their strong reactions only add to your own bewilderment. The temptations to gossip, to win people to our side means we must seek to guard our hearts. We follow the Servant King in how we continue to love one another. And we follow the One who persists in moving towards us in our distress.

Reflect

What have you valued about the relationships you've left behind?

What is hard about those relationships now?

Is there anything you particularly regret doing/not doing or saying/not saying?

Focus: Read John 13:1-5

What do we learn about the time and place this is happening from verse 1?

What do you notice about the pressures and powers at play? (v1-3)

What do we learn about Jesus' purpose and plans from this passage? (v1-3)

What do the actions of Jesus in verses 4-5 tell us about Him? What particularly strikes you about his attitude or actions?

Later in the passage, in verse 7, Jesus puts this in the context of his death on the cross - the ultimate way He serves them. In this, verse 15, 'I have set you an example'. This is a love that has loved us, has loved you, 'to the end'. What's your response to Him?

Write - speak - pray

What might 'serving' the people you've left behind at church look like? Ideas might include, staying in touch, drawing gentle but firm, writing a letter or having a conversation.

What might be different in your thinking or approach as you have Jesus' love in mind?

You might like to spend some time speaking with the Lord about the relationships that are strained, aiming for the strength to love wisely.

Session 5

How can I get over the reticence to engage with my new church family? How can I trust a church leadership/ community again?

Introduction

Joining a new church family can seem exciting, a relief, daunting and many other things besides. Being 'new' again is fun but forming relationships takes time. It can be hard to trust people. Bible study, prayer meetings, even serving on the coffee rota can feel tainted by the experiences in your last church. And our heart can be on high alert, on the lookout for things that might not be as they should be.

Reflect

What has been your experience of joining a new church family? What have you enjoyed? Is there anything that's particularly hard?

What are you seeing more clearly about 'church'? What things would God's Word have us avoid - what things are we called to pursue?

How would you now define 'church' for a 10 year old?

Focus: Read Ephesians 2

Paul is writing to the Ephesian believers. What does he seem keen to highlight about Jesus in these few verses? Go slowly, phrase by phrase.

What is already done, and what is still in progress for God's people?

What endpoints does God seem to be aiming at (v21)?

How do you see these truths reflected in your new church?

How do you want to grow in your understanding of church?

Can you be specific about any fears or concerns you have about church life now?

Write - speak - pray

What's on your heart in relation to church? Can you finish these sentences?

I just wish... _____

I long to... _____

I worry that... _____

I don't want... _____

Maybe you can speak these things to the Lord, knowing that he hears and loves.

Session 6

How can I tell whether I've picked up characteristics of an oppressive church culture? How have I been abusive, dismissive of, or controlling of others?

Introduction

Our church communities shape us to some extent. All of us pick up attitudes, styles of relating and vocabulary from the people around us. Some of that is wonderful. Some of it is destructive or dangerous. God wants better for his children.

Reflect

What would you say are the characteristics of the church culture where you were hurt?

Since the hurt, maybe your church has started to change. Maybe you have changed church. As you sit in a new homegroup and notice how things are done differently, what are you thinking? What do you freshly appreciate? Where in church life do you find yourself getting a bit frustrated or bristling or objecting? How does that look in the way you relate to others, what you get involved in?

Maybe we are not yet sure of the answers. Maybe we still feel we are in the depths of pain.

Focus: Read Psalm 130

In what way does the phrase, 'the depths' help describe the experience of asking the above questions or not being sure of the answers?

What does the psalm highlight about the Lord, both directly and indirectly?

As we think about the 'Reflect' questions above, what does the psalm suggest as priorities for us as His people?

What do we notice we want most as we take part in our new church's life? How do these desires resonate with what God says in his word?

Which of the responses in the psalm seem to come quite naturally, and which seem harder?

Write - speak - pray

See if you can speak the psalm to the Lord as yours. Add in specific phrases where you can.

e.g. Lord, hear my voice - *sometimes I wonder if you can hear me but I trust your attentiveness to my cry.*

But with you there is forgiveness - *forgive me for when I've wanted people to act differently and to serve my own agenda.*

You might like to consider reading Ray Ortlund's 'How to Build gospel culture':
thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/ray-ortlund/how-to-build-a-gospel-culture-in-your-church/

Session 7

How do I read and interpret the Bible carefully? How can the Lord speak to me when the methods I learned for reading scripture have been used for ungodly ends?

Introduction

We grow in love for Scripture as we continue to follow Jesus - it's sweet, clarifying and life-giving. Nothing changes the wonderful truth that these are the words of the One who made us and pursues us to be His own. Yet, after we have been hurt, we can find a uneasiness associated with hearing or reading the Bible.

A nervousness about preparing a Bible study or a resistance to having a quiet time - we feel unsure about its value for us and others. This can be a particularly challenging aspect of being hurt at church.

Reflect

Which parts of Scripture seem especially difficult to read? Which less so?

What makes those parts especially difficult? What's hard about them?

Are there verses or passages that have helpfully stayed with you? Maybe they have been affirmed or illustrated through other people, in creation, in your own reflections and praying or through music?

Do you have, or have you ever had a go-to favourite verse, or one that you find, or have found particularly comforting or life-giving?

Focus: Read Proverbs 30:5

Whose word is this? Note down what comes to mind about Him today.

Why do you think these two phrases of the proverb are put together in a pair?
In what ways can the Word be idolised over the author? How does this verse connect the Word to the person of God?

How does this verse describe God? What reasons are there to trust Him?

What might it help if we were more clearly to connect the words on the pages of the Bible with the person who speaks to us through them? How would you describe the goals of leading a bible study or small group in light of this verse?

It can be helpful to consider a different way of engaging with God's words. Which of these might be helpful to try? Team up with someone to listen to a Bible talk together; listen to songs; play an audio of God's word; use liturgy or prayer books; engage in a retreat or mediation on Scripture; and draw or doodle as you listen.

Write - speak - pray

See if you can complete these sentences. Then speak them out to the Lord.

I know your word is ... _____

But recently, coming to read or hear it has felt like ... _____

Father God, be my shield and my safe place. May your Word become more like a protection and a refuge to me. Help me take a practical step in coming near you through your Word again... *(be specific about your idea of something to try)*.

You might like to read: Biblical Counselling UK's 'Learning and turning':
bcuk.org/resource/learning-and-turning/

Session 8

My headaches have got worse and I don't sleep so well – what's happening to me? Is this linked to all that's gone on at church? Or I feel unsafe all the time – what's happening to me?

Introduction

Our bodies are the frame in which our souls live - we are embodied souls. We don't have to ignore the whispers of our physical body - they have been made and given breath by the Living God. Rather we notice the way we respond to long-term stressful situations, we look to the help He has provided in His gracious sovereignty and we turn again to Him in our need.

Reflect

How are you doing? Physically, mentally, emotionally. What have you noticed is troublesome or new in your body recently, or your sleeping and eating patterns?

Do you notice any connection with church-related conversation or activity? Do any obvious links stand out?

Who are you talking to about these things? Who could you talk to? A spouse, a friend, a GP?

To what extent have you been able to speak to the Lord about this too?

What steps can you take to look after your body well? How can you be attentive to your need for rest, exercise, nutrition? What techniques for breathing well or grounding can you learn?

Focus

Psalms 38 and 69 capture some vivid and painful experiences. Read both those psalms.

See if you can notice and underline the places where the Psalmist draws links between his heart, mind and body. Or note the various verses on paper.

What do you want to say to the Lord about the impact you have noticed on your body? Do any phrases from these extracts give you a starting point?

Write - speak - pray

Lord, do not forsake me;
do not be far from me, my God.
Come quickly to help me,
my Lord and my Saviour.

Psalm 38:21-22

How could you extend the thought in these verses and continue speaking to the Lord?

Maybe talk to him about your physical well-being - he cares about all of you.

Session 9

How do I know if I, as a leader, am creating a damaging culture? What should I look out for in myself and in my relationships and ministry patterns?

Introduction

Thank you for leading, teaching and shepherding the people of the King. It is a high calling and tough role. Thank you for asking this question. Our own growth in humility and Christlikeness is of great importance. We follow the servant King.

Asking this question at all suggests you are continuing to be intent on following Him.

Reflect

Who do you trust to help you answer this question? Staff team, close friends or family? It is important to pick people we trust but people who also will be honest with us.

Look around at some of your co-leaders. What patterns do you see in their lives? Is the fruit of the Spirit shining through? Are you actively helping them pursue that?

How would you describe your relationship with your church family?
Think corporately and also with individuals (staff, small group leaders, fringe members etc.)

Focus: Read Philippians 2:5-11

Jesus had his mind set on humbling Himself for us, for you. And He was/is God.
As you read verses 6-8 again, what strikes you most about his humility?

What's your response to Him today as you read these verses again?

How would you define your church leadership role? How does this passage help shape that view?

Can you identify loving servanthood in the leaders you work with or who you manage? What does it look like?

How about you? How well do you know and love the people you oversee?

Write - speak - pray

Try turning this section of Philippians into a personal prayer of commitment. If you have identified ways in which you could helpfully grow, ask for the Lord's help.

Meditate on any feedback you have received from others. Ask for the Lord's assistance to set aside defensiveness and listen to their words.

Session 10

Someone new has come to our church and they have hinted at being hurt by their old church - how can I help them?

Introduction

Compassion and discernment are attributes we can all seek to grow in. When we meet people who are hurting, we can listen to their stories. It can be helpful to ask gentle questions, encouraging them to talk - freely and safely, in their own time.

We do well to resist making snap judgments. We can commit to sticking with them as they process their troubles. And we can draw in others to support and help. All along the way, we can remember that neither you nor their new church are their Saviour. Jesus is.

Reflect

Where did they first hint at the fact they have been hurt in a church context?
How might you create a quiet, safe context for them to talk more if they want to?

How might you continue the conversation? What will your next question be?

Who else might you think of drawing in to the conversation, or at least who will know these conversations are happening (e.g. a pastor, small group leader)?
Might you discuss that first with the new person?

What do you notice about your response to this new person? Curiosity, compassion, unease, annoyance? Have you experienced anything similar to them?

Focus: Read Hebrews 4:12-16

The writer of Hebrews talks about ensuring we enter the Lord's promise of rest. His promise, His word is eternal and stands firm in the heavens.

How do verses 12-13 help us understand the Lord's word? What does it tell us about who He is?

How does Jesus' role as priest help us see how we respond to the Lord (v 14-16)? What is assuring or challenging for us here as helpers of those who have been hurt at church? What else strikes you?

How might these verses shape your prayers for yourself and the person you are helping?

Write - speak - pray

Try praying for yourself - how do you want to grow in knowing who God is and what He is concerned about?

Try praying for the person you are helping - in what way do you particularly hope the Lord will draw near them, and how do you hope they will know Him better?