**Trauma Is Not a Life Sentence**



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Trauma is a certain *kind* of suffering — the kind that overwhelms one’s ability to cope. A whole class of wounds that cripple. A wound that buries itself deep in our consciousness. A tragedy too heavy for us. It happens in the past, but asserts itself over and over in the present.

Sex, too early.
Death, sudden.
Violence, familiar.
Betrayal, intimate.
Neglect, prolonged.
Violation, normalized.
Abuse, excused.
Pain, pervasive.

The trauma of combat and the trauma of abuse have similarities, but are not the same. We are focusing here on trauma related to abuse which, despite often happening so close to home, requires wartime metaphors to make sense of the tumult in our minds and hearts.

How do we faithfully navigate the overwhelming wounds and unpredictable triggers as believers?

**Trauma for Christians**

Some Christians have been trained to think that proper believers will not continue to experience traumatic symptoms for the rest of their lives because of Christ’s liberating work. On the other hand, hope and freedom are withheld by other well-meaning Christian counselors who insist on our “need to process” — the *need* to focus exclusively on our trauma, the *need* to speak at length about the pain, the *need* to obsess over it, the *need* to become preoccupied with our wounds — the notion that only in giving ourselves over to our trauma can we be free from it. One is cruel optimism; the other is an incurable diagnosis. Both are forms of false witness.

Both are things professionals say. Both things amateurs say. Depending on the circumstances, both remotely accurate, and both totally false. So how do we know what to believe about ourselves, and about God? The church seems to walk precariously in these situations between two serious trenches: 1) teaching that Christ insists on a certain kind and pace of recovery for the wounded, or 2) insisting that lifelong psychological trauma is so much a human experience that God cannot help much.

There are countless stories of churches blanching traumatic experiences and ongoing distress with reductionistic redemptive strategies, undercutting and offending the legitimacy and necessity of true lament. There are countless other stories of parents’ relationships with their children utterly destroyed — not to mention seeming relationships with God — because a counselor was overly fixated on the trauma. For these reasons, the term *trauma* is heard both too little and too often in our day — too little in addressing the profound wreckage of abuse, and too often as the controlling, decisive narrative in our story.

**Five Gifts from God to the Traumatized**

How can we speak of Christ without overpromising with well-wishes that may not come true in this life? How can we name trauma without excusing someone entirely for awful patterns of sinful and destructive symptoms? How can we address trauma with clarity and honesty without letting it control or consume us? How can Christians faithfully and lovingly speak theological truth about trauma? Here are five things God gives the traumatized.

**1. God remembers evil.**

God remembers the evil that caused our traumas. He will not forget the life of our lost loved one, the transgression of our abuser, the brutal pain of violence, the shock and awe of loss, the aching regret over wounds for which we’re responsible. One day, he will bring all of it into the light with crystal clarity and perfect justice. Genuine trauma is done a disservice when the wound is hidden. Satan wants you to hide and deceive. God wants you to come to him with every honest, painful detail.

Trauma is mitigated first of all by calling that which is evil “evil,” and that which is devastating “trauma.” Its effects are only able to be survived and minimized when the whole tragedy has first come into view. The past will not be whitewashed for the sake of protecting the privileged. The men or women, the kings, the powerful, the institutional leaders, all those who abused power for their own personal gain — all evil acts will be properly labeled as evil, and *remembered* as the perpetuation of trauma.

**2. God tells stories of trauma that would be easier to forget.**

Glossing over the darkness for the sake of a redemptive story only perpetuates trauma. Calling the smallest signs of functionality “healing” and “progress” can actually undercut real healing and progress by minimizing pain and loss. The process of recovery is not typically immediate. Accurate self-assessment and self-honesty, as much as it is possible, is what places us within God’s true story about us, not trying to contrive redemptive emotions and improvement before they truly come.

God speaks about our trauma with precision. No ambiguous talk of “darkness,” “shame,” or “chains” will accurately describe the transgression of abuse, or the self-harming cycles into which it throws its victims. Not crassness. Not oversharing. Not shouting it from the rooftops or bulldozing every conversation with its weight. But God *does* encourage and embrace nuance.

The narratives in the Old Testament are awkwardly full of details. Like peering at surveillance footage, God inspired the authors to exposit the events with brutal accuracy. Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38). A Levite and his concubine (Judges 19). Amnon and Tamar (2 Samuel 13).

These are ugly, awful stories about traumatic experiences among God’s faithful ones. God didn’t intervene to prevent the abuse. God didn’t micromanage the suffering, or give the victims a clean and quick “recovery story.” And yet he still put them on stage in his redemptive story.

Judah and Tamar *interrupt* the Joseph narrative. The Levite and his concubine *interrupt* the final cycle of Judges. Judah and Tamar *interrupt* David’s saga with Bathsheba and Absalom. God interrupts the stories of redemption with short stories of lives interrupted by trauma, some that are never resolved for us.

**3. God speaks specifically to the depths of our suffering.**

God gives us words for abuse. Massive portions of the Bible were written in poetry, because mere prose cannot communicate the pain and struggle and emotion that poetry can.

Not all prayers have to end in a major key, despite what many simplistic blogs and books and sermons may suggest. The book of Lamentations — of sorrows — ends in a whimper: in God’s arms, yet still fragile and vulnerable, still anxiously awaiting the next jab from his sword. After trust seems to have been betrayed — trust in a God who could have prevented the pain, trust in a friend who was supposed to protect, trust in a system that was supposed to defend us — the pain and trauma run much deeper.

As in David’s poem,

 My companion stretched out his hand against his friends;

 he violated his covenant.

 His speech was smooth as butter,

 yet war was in his heart;

 his words were softer than oil,

 yet they were drawn swords. ([Psalm 55:20–21](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Ps%2055.20%E2%80%9321))

God gives us better words. More accurate words. He gives us the poetic voice of reality.

Truth can feel like a heavy burden for the hurting, but it is ultimately the only relief for the oppressed. Truthful and beautiful words cut through deceitful uses of Scripture and their accompanying half-truths. Lamentations. Jeremiah. Isaiah 1–40. Psalms 3–12. When the abuse begins to isolate us, God shows up next to us in the foxhole, with words meant for the foxhole, words we never could have fully understood anywhere else.

**4. God gives us himself, even in the midst of triggers.**

A “trigger” is when the past interrupts the present without apology, and often without warning. We may not even know we are being triggered until much later on (we may not ever know in this life). Have you ever felt an unexplained surge of anxiety or anger? Is that feeling consistently experienced with one person or in a particular place? How does that relate to your past experience? Our triggers are neither good nor evil. They are adaptive tools our body gives us to protect us from future harm, but they are often overactive in telling us that there is danger where there is none. How do we navigate?

The Bible gives us powerful words in defense: “Leave your fatherless children; I will keep them alive; and let your widows trust in me.” ([Jeremiah 49:11](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Jer%2049.11))

But orphans die. Widows die. What good does God holding them really do? Forces of protection that once gave us a sense of stability and love are ripped out of our arms. The traumatized are slapped with the realization of humanity’s dire situation: the God who can do anything promises us no circumstantial prosperity in this life. The Bible doesn’t shy away from the cruelty of the world: “Let everyone beware of his neighbor,” for “every neighbor goes about as a slanderer” ([Jeremiah 9:4](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Jer%209.4)).

Hold [Jeremiah 49:11](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Jer%2049.11) and [9:4](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Jeremiah%209.4) in tension. Trust your sanctified gut, but get to the bottom of your triggers — when are they telling you a tall tale about danger? Anxiety is often a prophet of doom from a future of half-truths. The traumatized must feel their ways through spiritual warfare like every one else, but with a peculiar handicap.

Trust, and beware. Step out, and watch your step. Don’t submit to the prison of your fear, but accept the edge it gives you: “Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” ([Matthew 10:16](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matt%2010.16)). Know that it wasn’t your fault, and don’t start blaming everyone else for everything else. The gospel really can provide the impossible feelings of joy, hope, and love for those willing to bravely embrace the impossibility with faith.

**5. God gives us permission to feel with faith.**

We may feel insulted by that — “I don’t *need* God’s permission” — but the Bible creates space for us to feel and process our pain, if we will do it with faith, believing the promises of God even when they feel too distant or unreliable. John Calvin wrote about his pain, “I leave these wounds untouched, because they appear to me incurable until the Lord apply his hand” ([*Letters, Vol. 2*](https://www.amazon.com/Letters-John-Calvin-Vol-Manuscripts/dp/1330364848?tag=desigod06-20), 57). The isolation of trauma may seem even harder when we know there is a God who could bring resolution but doesn’t.

The Christian life often welcomes suffering, or makes our experiences of suffering more intense. God gives us permission to say, “This life is harder.” It certainly was for the apostle Paul ([2 Corinthians 11:23–27](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/2%20Cor%2011.23%E2%80%9327)). Many things would be easier without Christ. Perhaps even healing from trauma could be expedited if we didn’t have to juggle our own recovery with questions about divine sovereignty and evil.

**You Can Be Free**

Too much “ministry” to victims of abuse amounts to little more than wand-waving over secular group therapy. The church will never be the perfect place in this age. The church may never be as informed as the trauma clinic, as trained and specialized as the therapist, as warm as the childhood friend. Or in some cases, it could be all of the above. There is no such thing as a perfect community. Not yet. Resist requiring that standard from others or, as the church, pretending to meet it.

“Truth can feel like a heavy burden for the hurting, but it is ultimately the only relief for the oppressed.”

It can feel really good in the moment to make promises that God doesn’t make, like, “Jesus will make the pain go away.” Sometimes he does in this life; sometimes he doesn’t. But it is important to know that *trauma is not a life sentence*. It’s not something that *has* to control us forever. No trauma is bigger than God. It can be arduous to authentically work through, even in the light of grace. It takes patience and boldness, produced by the Spirit. But many have genuinely recovered, and more have learned to live grace-filled and fruitful lives beyond and despite, even because of, their pain and its triggers. All our suffering is some expression of the now-and-not-yet of Christian existence.

Many of us may not feel ourselves running into glory, but limping, and others crippled and carried ([Mark 2:4](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Mark%202.4)). But take heart, Christ himself refuses to forget the scars of his earthly pain, even in glory: “I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain” ([Revelation 5:6](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Rev%205.6)). Christ is the one who bought and signifies the breakability of the chains of death. We may not feel the full weight of that hope today, but we will one day.

http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/trauma-is-not-a-life-sentence