



Living with Pain

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Life Plan Disrupted Leader's Guide

Opening Prayer

Introduction:

At age 27, I felt like I had it all--a career I loved, great health, a wonderful fiancé--but then it all changed. Overnight I was suddenly struck down by a rare form of degenerative disc disease, which disabled me with excruciating back pain. My life came to a screeching halt. Unable to work or be up on my feet for more than a few minutes at a time, I saw 20 different doctors in the first year of our marriage. They ordered a head-spinning number of diagnostic tests and countless treatments. Eventually, over a multi-year process, I had several surgeries. The surgeons removed much of the weak disc tissue in my spine, replacing my discs with bone, plastic, and metal. To our great disappointment, however, they didn't remove my disabling pain.

I did not want to be disabled by pain. That wasn't my life plan. I wanted to be married, have four kids, live in Colorado, work as a physical therapist, and enjoy mountain climbing on the weekends. Instead, I have pain 24/7 that forces me to lie horizontal 20 to 22 hours a day. I have a wonderful husband, but having even one child was a huge stretch for us, let alone the envisioned four! As for leisure activities? Not only have active things been taken away, but also sedentary activities are not possible for me. I can't sit up more than about 10 minutes, so I can't even be a spectator at a sporting event or go out to eat in a restaurant. My lifestyle changed from high adventure to being largely homebound. I grieved deeply over this unwanted change.

If this wasn't my life plan, was it God's plan for me? Jeremiah 29:11 says: "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." That sure sounds like God has a plan for each one of us.

I found this to be comforting and yet confusing. Becoming disabled by pain didn't seem like a good plan to me. And to be clear, I'm not saying that God caused my pain. I'm saying that in His wisdom and sovereignty,

He permitted it. Why? I'm not sure. As we'll study in Job, God is not the only spiritual force in the universe. There's a hidden battle going on. But God can bring good out of evil, and in Romans 8:28 He promises to work all things for good in the lives of His children.

I'm sure every one of you can think of lost hopes or unfulfilled expectations as you reflect on the damage that chronic pain has caused in your life. Maybe you were someone who always served others, but now you have to receive help instead. Perhaps you looked forward to relating with grandchildren, only to have physical constraints on what you can do with them.

Or maybe you are still a younger woman with children at home and work to be done, but pain has taken every ounce of your coping ability — and then some. You wonder how in the world you can meet your responsibilities when pain nags away at you. Possibly some of you grieve a decline in physical intimacy with your spouse because of chronic pain ... or have questions about finding a spouse if pain is in the picture ... or have lost a spouse to divorce thanks to pain's caustic effects on families.

Do any of you struggle with feeling useless if you can no longer be productive? I've sure had those days. And because chronic pain is often invisible, it's fairly common to feel alone in it because others just don't understand. Even worse, some of us have had doctors, coworkers, or family members disbelieve we have pain, or doubt that it's really as bad as we say it is. This can leave us feeling discounted, discredited, and defensive.

How do we cope? What do we hope for when pain has taken so much away? And how do we look for God's presence in the midst of our trials?

Read Job Chapter 1

1. What kind of a man was Job in terms of earthly wealth?

He owned thousands of animals, he had a large number of servants, and he was the greatest man among all the peoples of the East (v. 3).

2. What kind of a relationship did Job have with God?

Job was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil (v. 1b).

Job sacrificed burnt offerings for his children in case they had sinned and cursed God in their hearts (v. 5).

3. Who presents himself to God, along with the angels?

Satan also came with them (v. 6).

4. How does God describe His servant Job?

And the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?" (v. 8)

5. What is Satan's challenge to God?

Satan accuses Job of only fearing God in order to get a blessing. He predicts that if God strikes everything Job has, Job will curse God to his face (vv. 9-11).

6. Was Job's life interrupted? What was the extent of Job's losses in Chapter One?

Yes, Job's life was interrupted! He lost his wealth and his children. The Sabeans stole his oxen and donkeys and killed his servants (vv. 13-15).

Lightning burned Job's sheep and servants (v. 16).

The Chaldeans took his camels and killed the servants (v. 17).

A mighty wind killed Job's seven sons and three daughters (vv. 18-19).

Although God gave permission, all Job's calamity was caused by Satan (v. 12).

7. Has pain interrupted your life? What have been some of your losses because of pain?

Please encourage open sharing among the group participants. It may be emotionally painful to talk about losses, but it is healing. Use affirming body language and active listening skills here. Be conscious of the time, however, and limit sharing to no more than ten minutes or so. Let participants know how much time you can devote to this.

8. What does James 4:13-14 tell us about our plans? Is human control an illusion?

When we make plans for the future, we need to remember that we don't even know what will happen tomorrow. Yes, human control is an illusion.

9. In James 4:15, how does God instruct us to qualify our plans?

Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that."

10. How does Job respond to the testing that God allows?

Job tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell to the ground and worshiped God. He did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing (vv. 20-22).

11. How do you feel that you have responded to your trial of chronic pain? (Please respond honestly, even if you feel you have sinned by blaming God at times.)

Possible responses include begging God for relief, asking "Why?", being angry at God, blaming God, wondering whether pain might be a punishment, feeling like God is distant, and other reactions to pain. Emphasize that God loves each woman deeply even though pain's

presence may make it hard to feel His love. Our belief in God's love for us is based on His Word rather than on our feelings. Remind the women that God freely offers forgiveness for any response to pain which may have been sinful.

Read Job 2:1-10.

12. What is Job's second test? What does God give Satan permission to do?

Satan challenges God to "stretch out your hand and touch his (Job's) bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face" (v. 5).

An the LORD said to Satan, "Behold, he is in your hand" (v. 6).

13. What limits does God place on Satan's action?

"... only spare his life ..." (v. 6).

14. With what does Satan afflict Job?

So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and struck Job with loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head (v.7).

15. Do you find it validating that physical pain was deemed hard to bear? If so, why?

Physical pain, especially when it's chronic, is a steady, noxious assault on one's nervous system. It is physiologically linked to depression and is experienced by most people as a serious burden. Knowing that this is true can validate the sufferer's experience.

16. What does Job's wife encourage him to do?

Then his wife said to him, "Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die" (v. 9).

17. What does Job actually do/say?

But he said to her, "You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips (v. 10).

18. What is the difference between grieving your losses, being angry at God, blaming God, and cursing God? Are they responses on a continuum?

Grief is a normal human response to loss and is a stage on the road to acceptance.

Being angry in the face of loss is also normal, but we are cautioned in Psalm 4:4, Be angry, do not sin. As a cry of pain from the heart, voicing anger is acceptable.

Blaming God for a loss is accusing God of failing to be our Protector. It overlooks the fact that we live in a fallen world where sin and its results cause suffering of many kinds.

Cursing God, as Job's wife demanded, violates the second commandment: "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain" (Exodus 20:7). Cursing God assassinates His character.

19. Which responses are sinful? Which are not?

If our anger becomes an accusation against God's goodness, it becomes sinful. However, grieving and cries of distress from our hearts are not sinful.

20. Which responses preserve the relationship between you and God? Which do not?

No sin terminates the relationship with God except for the sin against the Holy Spirit: persistent rejection of God's gracious offer of forgiveness and salvation. (Matthew 12:31, 32).

Blaming God and even cursing God can be followed by repentance, forgiveness, and restoration of relationship. God is eager to forgive even if, in a moment of anger, you cursed Him! If you already carry the burden of pain, you don't need to carry the extra burden of guilt. Confess your sin to God, and receive His wonderful forgiveness.

21. When you think about Job's tests, what was the purpose of his life interruption?

- From Satan's point of view?

Satan wants to prove that Job only loves God for the blessings he receives from God. Satan wants to tempt Job to lose his faith.

- From God's point of view?

God would enable Job to respond in faith, proving Satan wrong! Job fears

Summary:

If you think that Job's response was superhuman and you could never live up to his example, I can tell you that he spends several chapters after this questioning God, wishing he'd never been born and grieving in general. Still, he was deemed faithful.

and loves God, but not just for the material blessings which God can give. God's purpose is to test and strengthen Job's faith in God as his Redeemer.

God does not cause evil, but when evil happens, He brings good from it. And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28).

22. Has your pain caused you to reach out for help from God? Has God brought you comfort through the promises of His Word?

Encourage the women to share a favorite Bible verse which has helped them.

23. Do you think your response to your suffering matters?

As Christian women, we are ambassadors for God, and yes, our response to our suffering matters. Others will see us turning to God for help and relying on God's loving strength, even when we don't understand our suffering. God gives us encouragement to trust Him in Proverbs 3:5, 6: Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

God wants a loving relationship with each of us. He sent His only Son, Jesus, to die for each one of us, so that by faith in Him we could be saved from our sin. When we're in pain, even if we strike out at Him in anger, He still loves us. He forgives us when we cross the line between trusting submission and accusations against Him for not protecting us completely. He is big enough to handle our anger, even when misplaced. He just doesn't want us to walk away and never come back! God treasures a close, intimate relationship with us, His children. He wants us to come to Him in our bewildering and confusing moments, when our pain causes us to have more questions than answers, when it may feel like we're holding onto our faith by a thread.

Knowing that God loves us and will be faithful to us when we are at our weakest is very reassuring. When we repent of our doubt and times of lashing out, He always forgives and helps us try again. Our goal in responding to our pain is not perfection--it's a Gospel-worked faith which enables us to grow in intimacy with our Heavenly Father!

Closing Prayer

Closing Hymn: Say or sing "What God Ordains Is Always Good"
(*LSB #760; LW #422; TLH #521*) or "I Leave All Things to God's
Direction" (*LSB #719; LW #429; TLH #529*).