

# TURNING YOUR PAIN INTO PURPOSE



GRIEF COURSE

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Week 7

The sixth need each of us has pertaining to our grief journey is to turn our pain into purpose, to find meaning in our lives after loss.

### Resilience

I want to begin by talking about the importance of resilience. It's what the Bible calls *perseverance*. The ability to bounce back from difficult experiences and engage life again.

Paul writes in Romans 5, "We also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us" (Romans 5:3-5 NIV).

How many would agree that life doesn't always turn out as planned? Proverbs 24:16 says, "For though the righteous fall seven times, they rise again." I like this verse because it says that even righteous people fall. The writer isn't talking about falling into sin here as much as falling into trouble and hardship. It says seven times which signifies many times. In the Bible the number 7 symbolizes completeness. The writer is emphasizing that they didn't stay down but they got back up, they bounced back.

Most people experience some kind of traumatic event or loss in their lifetime – a turning point in life. Some will bounce back while others will not. Two people can face a similar loss and one grows through it and the other is destroyed by it. One becomes better while the other becomes bitter.

How does a person bounce back in life? I think it comes down to their belief in God and his Word. In particular the belief that God is good.

Author and theologian A.W. Tozer begins his book, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, with these words, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.” What do you conceive God to be like? We tend to move toward our mental image of God. The most revealing thing about each of us is our idea of God.

The goodness of God is a central theme throughout the Bible. God Himself is good; that is, He is everything that God should be. There are no defects or contradictions in Him, and nothing can be added to His nature to make Him any better.

Because God is Himself the highest and greatest good, He is also the source and fountain of all other good. Everything God does is good, and all His acts are the outflowing of His goodness.

### **A Promise from God (Romans 8:28)**

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28 NIV).

This verse is a promise. "Works" is the Greek word *synergy*. An NIV footnote on Romans 8:28 says, "He (God) works together with those who love him to bring about what is good."

God is working with those who love him, partnering with us to bring about good in all things. I think if we were honest we'd say, "Sometimes this verse has been of great comfort to me. And at other times it has stretched my capacity to believe to the nth degree, so much so that I have wanted to tear it out of my Bible. Have you ever felt like that? "Yeah, right God! You're going to take this tragedy in my life and eventually turn it into something that's good? Really?"

Why does God work things together for good? Because God is good. King David said in Psalm 34:8: "Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who trusts in Him!"

Nahum 1:7 says, "The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; and He knows those who trust in Him."

And Chronicles 16:34 says, "Oh give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; for His steadfast love endures forever!"

I like to say, "God is good ... all the time. And all the time ... God is good." God's very nature is good, and he has the power to turn our losses and hardships into something good. Joseph said these powerful words after his brothers sold him into slavery and told his father that he was dead. God in the meantime raised Joseph up to second in command in Egypt. "You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people" (Genesis 50:20 NLT).

### 3 Categories of People in Regard to God's Promise

In regard to Romans 8:28, some of you are what I refer to as BPs. You are "Before Pain" people. Some people actually can live the first 15, 20, or even 30 years of your life without some kind of tragedy coming their way. And if you're BP, Romans 8:28 to you is a THEORY. That's all it is.

Then for some of you, you are right in the middle of pain. You're what I refer to as IPs. You're "In Pain." And whenever you hear or read this verse it's a LIFELINE.

You think, "If that verse weren't in my Bible, I would think the world's out of control. But with this verse I can hang on because I know something good is going to come out of this pain. So, I'm going to lean into God and trust him to do something redemptive despite the pain."

And then the rest of us are what I refer to as APs, "After Pain." We're healing from pain. For those of us who have been through it and are on the backside now, Romans 8:28 is a TREASURE. It's a gift. Do you know what I'm talking about? Romans 8:28 sure a verse I cherish and cling to.

### The Power of Meaning

Meaning reflects the love we have for those we have lost. Finding meaning is often where our healing resides. I encourage those who work with grieving people to help those they counsel to search for meaning.

Loss is what happens to you; meaning is what you make happen. Meaning is the key for finding joy once again after loss.

Your vulnerability is where your true strength lies. Paul wrote, "But he (God) said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me'" (2 Corinthians 12:9 NIV).

### **Creating Meaning in Your Life**

Meaning is relative and personal. It takes time. It usually doesn't appear right away but builds up over the years. Meaning doesn't have to be grand or dramatic. You don't have to start a nonprofit company to find meaning.

Meaning doesn't equal understanding why your loved one died. You may never understand the reason for your loss. The question to ask is not why did she die, but why did I live? Why am I still here?

### **My Mess Became My Ministry**

Our deepest life messages come out of our deepest pain. My mess became my ministry. My misery became my message. My pain became my purpose. I didn't choose to go into grief ministry, it chose me. But I love what I do. I get to come alongside people in their darkest hour and bring comfort and hope.

The biggest hurt in my life by far was the death of my youngest daughter, Jackie, who died from a brain tumor when she was 5 years old. Nearly every day I talk to somebody about loss and grief in my role as a Care Pastor at Saddleback.

### **Redemptive Suffering**

C.S. Lewis, author of *The Problem of Pain*, penned these famous words: "Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but SHOUTS in our pain: it is His MEGAPHONE to rouse a deaf world."

The good news is when we experience deep pain, we become keenly more aware of God's character. When our self-sufficiency is peeled away, we then see how vulnerable and weak we really are.

2 Corinthians 1:3-4 says: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God."

### **Two Truths about God's Unbelievable Character**

1. He's the Father of Compassion - The Greek Word translated compassion means, "deep feeling about someone's pain or misfortune." That's how God the Father feels about us.

2. He's the God of All Comfort - When our hearts are breaking, when we are overwhelmed with pain or grief, God's comfort becomes a healing ointment to our souls. He comforts us with the truth of his love, his presence, and his amazing grace.

### **God Wants to Use Your Pain to Help Others**

God doesn't want to waste a hurt; he wants to redeem it. God comforts us for a specific reason (v.4) "so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God." Our Heavenly Father wants us to do something in response to the comfort He has given to us. God expects us to use our pain to help others.

Think of your greatest loss, the most painful situation you've ever faced in your life? God doesn't want you to waste that hurt; rather he wants to redeem your suffering.

### **3 People Who Turned Their Pain into Purpose**

A young girl named Jesse had hope and peace in the midst of her own cancer diagnosis as she visited other kids with cancer in the hospital and gave out JoyJars that she created. Erik Rees, her father, started NEGU (Never Ever Give Up) to honor his daughter, 12-year-old Jesse Rees who died of cancer.

A mom named Candy Lightner endured the death of her 13-year-old daughter, Cari, who was hit by a drunk driver while walking and yet Candy turned around to help others avoid such pain by starting MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Drivers).

Kay Warren, who out of her own pain over the loss of her son Matthew, that suffered himself from mental health issues and who died from suicide, started a Mental Health Community at Saddleback called Hope for Mental Health.

### **My Story**



A few years after Jackie died, I was asked to speak at Forest Lawn's 100 Year Anniversary. I spoke about purpose. Then they asked if I would do funerals for them which I did. Then they trained me to become a Certified Funeral Celebrant. I conducted funerals and Celebration of Life services for Forest Lawn for over five years.

Forest Lawn also asked me to speak at number of there Candle Lighting Memorial Services to remember those that died. It's a service to honor a loved one's memory and celebrate all that that person did to light up their life and the lives of everyone they touched. I spoke at these services in different cities over five years that saw thousands of people attend looking for hope.

March 4<sup>th</sup> used to be the worst day of the year for me every year. It's the day Jackie died. I decided to be intentional and to turn my pain into purpose by shooting 100 free throws on March 4<sup>th</sup> to raise money for the HEART Ministry in Kenya, Africa, in order to save lives. I've raised over \$10,000 over the years for this significant ministry.

Jackie was part of the *Pamelot School of Dance* in Auburn, CA. Pamelot was founded by Pam Harrold. Jackie loved to dance and was learning ballet, tap and jazz. After her death, Pam created a dance scholarship in Jackie's name which is given to one young girl dancer each year. A year after Jackie's passing, we attended a dance recital where Pam presented a young girl with the first Jackie Page Dance Scholarship. We feel so honored that Pam and the Pamelot Family witnessed our grief, honored our little girl, and is keeping Jackie's memory alive.

A couple years ago I felt God calling me to become a Pastor Care Pastor at Saddleback Church who specialized in grief ministry and memorial services. I felt a burden to start a Grief Community for those who grieve because grief never dies because our love never dies. In an effort to create space for the bereaved at Saddleback, and to honor my daughter Jackie, I recently started our Hope for Grief Community.

### **The Model of Jesus**

The cross of Jesus Christ reveals to us love of God: His willingness to die in our place for and to take our sin upon himself is mind-blowing. His pain truly was our gain. He turned the greatest adversity the world has ever known into the greatest advantage.

An interesting reality of suffering is that our personal pain also speaks to those around us. Our pain becomes God's MEGAPHONE to a hurting and watching world.

### **Our Pain Gives Us a Platform**

What pain in your life can you help someone else through? What am I saying to the world in the midst of my pain? God's character and grace do not change when suffering comes. As I trust God, even in my heartache, I let my life speak of a hope that extends well beyond what we can see or touch.

If unbelievers, who are experiencing their own pain are going to seek out a Christ-follower for help, it will not be because we appear to live lives that are free from trials but because we are honest about our own pain and sufferings.

We will not attempt to have an answer for every question since we know that only God knows certain things, but we will affirm that even in the mystery of his purposes we know the security of His love and we will seek to introduce others to our God who entered into our sorrows and our sufferings. As our pain shouts to a hurting world, may our lives always sing of the fact that God is good even when our circumstances are not.

### **Jackie Power**

One of the most thrilling experiences I've ever had in my life came one ordinary morning. Jackie's brain tumor was changing nearly everything, except one thing: her spirit. The brain is the most complex part of the human body. Malignant brain tumors usually grow quickly and spread into other brain tissue.

When a tumor grows into or presses on an area of the brain, it may stop that part of the brain from working the way it should. Dr. Pang, here neurosurgeon, described her tumor in like roots of a tree. They can grow vertically or horizontally in whatever direction they choose. Jackie's lungs had already been affected.

As a result, Jackie went from running everywhere she went, to walking and then crawling. Her mobility seemed to be going backwards toward infancy. She was now at a point where she couldn't even crawl anymore. She lost her ability to speak but was able to make sounds, much like grunts. We developed a communication system with her so that when she wanted to go somewhere in the house, she would make a certain sound, we would pick her up, and she would point to where she wanted to go.

On one occasion, I picked her up and she pointed toward the kitchen. I carried her to the kitchen, and she motioned for me to set her down on the kitchen counter. I wondered what she wanted in the kitchen, probably something to eat.

To my surprise, she was trying to assemble all the strength she had in her little legs in an attempt to stand up on the counter. The tumor had weakened the communication between her brain, muscles, and reflexes.

Looking much like a fawn attempting to stand up for the first time, her little legs wobbled and shook as she willed her way to a crouched position, finally standing completely upright.

I looked at her and thought - what is she up to? In that moment as I looked into her eyes, I realized my little girl wasn't going to allow this disease to trap her or prevent her from living life and having some fun.

She wanted to play the jumping game we had played dozens of times before. Just a few weeks earlier, Jackie would crawl up onto the kitchen counter and take a flying leap off the counter and I would catch her. It was one of her favorite games along with another game where she would hold my hands and walk up my legs and chest and flip into a dismount, holding her hands up in the air like an Olympic gymnast dismounting off a balance beam.

Before the tumor, she would pull herself up onto the counter into a standing position. I would stand directly in front of her about a foot away. She would hold up her right hand and motion for me to move back. Each time she gave me the signal, I would take one step back, increasing the length of her jump. To me, Jackie was *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County*. She would have made an excellent broad jumper because she reached a point where she was leaping nearly four feet across the kitchen and into my arms.

It was unthinkable to me that she was going to attempt to jump into my arms again in her condition, but she was. Our eyes met after she stood up and I realized what she is planning.

I doubted that she could do it, but I didn't let on to her how I was feeling. Thoughts were racing through my mind, but I didn't announce them out loud.

In that split second, I wanted to ask, "You're not really going to jump, are you Jackie? You can't jump. You don't have enough strength in your legs or little body to pull it off," but I didn't say a word, rather I kept my thoughts to myself.

I just moved in very close about six inches from the counter. "If you want to jump, Daddy will catch you," I said, without a waver in my voice. She trusted my strong arms to catch her.

I couldn't believe what happened next.

Jackie raised her little right hand and motioned for me to move back further, away from the counter. I was awestruck. I started to well up with tears, but I didn't want her to see me cry. I tried my best to hide my tears. I stepped back about six inches.

Normally, I would have stepped back a foot but I wanted to be close enough in case she just fell straight down from the edge of the counter. I was ready for her to jump. I was in position and had my arms spread wide open. She didn't jump but motioned again for me to move back further.

What was she thinking? I worried if I took another step back, she would land on the floor and suffer an injury. However, she believed it was possible. In fact, she looked so confident and that look convinced me to do it her way.

I stepped back six more inches. She motioned a third time to move back further. She wasn't satisfied with my placement so close to the counter. Now, we were moving from the unimaginable to the absurd. I couldn't hide the tears at this point. I again took one small step back.

Without any warning, she mustered up every ounce of strength she had in her little body and gave it her best attempt at jumping off the counter. In reality, she kind of just fell straightforward and fortunately, I was close enough to lean forward and catch her in my arms. I held and hugged her for all it was worth. I kissed her little head and held her up in the air. "Jackie, Daddy's so proud of you. That was so amazing," I said with glee. She smiled as best she could.

Standing up and jumping off that kitchen counter was the most courageous act I have ever witnessed in my life. It was inconceivable that she was able to pull it off. I will never forget that moment. It became a watershed moment, a turning point in my life.

I realized that we are all capable of so much more than we think. Jackie's strength in the midst of hardship gave me a motivation to "go for it" in life. She became my hero. She became my inspiration, the wind beneath my wings.

As I reflected on that moment, I came up with the phrase, "Jackie Power." In spite of everything, she had unfathomable power in her soul. She wanted to take one more jump off the counter into my arms. She believed it was possible and she made it happen.

For me, Jackie Power came to represent the power I have within myself. Whenever I think I don't have enough strength, I call upon my Jackie Power. Her example of courage and strength inspired me to overcome any fear, challenge, or obstacle I may face. We all have Jackie Power if we tap into it and believe in the possibilities. What's your Jackie Power?

My Jackie Power started with weightlifting. I was lifting some heavy weight on the bench press with a goal of doing eight repetitions. On the eighth rep, my arms started to shake, and I didn't think I could get the bar up. I thought of Jackie and what she endured. I pictured her in my mind struggling to stand up on the counter and finally stranding erect. That thought gave me a shot of adrenaline as I pushed the bar all the way up. Jackie Power.

Next, I felt led to go back to school and get an MBA degree in leadership. I already had one master's degree in theology that I obtained in my mid-twenties. I was now in my late forties. The idea of studying and writing two papers a week for a couple years was daunting. I enrolled in an Executive MBA program at the Ken Blanchard School of Business at Grand Canyon University. It was a grueling program that stretched me to the limit. The result was that I really grew as a leader and as a person.

One particular instance, just three months into the program, I felt overwhelmed and wanted to quit. I didn't think I could do it. It was just too much work. Just as I about to throw in the towel on myself, I thought of Jackie, her tenacity, courage, and I powered through. Jackie Power.

What a gift Jackie gave me the day she jumped off the kitchen counter. I really believe I can overcome anything that comes my way because of her. I wish everybody could tap into Jackie Power like this. That's why I'm sharing it.

I call it Jackie Power, a gift of courage.

Due to Jackie's example, I am willing to venture outside of my comfort zone, attempt big projects, and achieve things I never dreamed possible.

I enrolled in a Doctorate program at Biola University in my early fifties. The final project was to write a 250-page dissertation. I didn't think I could do it but I remembered Jackie's act of courage. I completed the dissertation and graduated two years ago with my doctorate. Jackie Power.



I was recently diagnosed with leukemia. I was shocked and scared. Leukemia, chronic lymphocytic leukemia (CLL) in my case, is a terminal blood disease. I once again thought of Jackie and my attitude became "I am living with leukemia, not dying with leukemia. Jackie Power.

Jackie's example inspired me to start our Hope for Grief Community at Saddleback. As it turns out, all of this was possible because of my little girl who had a brain tumor in her head. Death does not have the last word – God does. Through it all, she was never in despair; she was jumping to experience the joy in life. She never gave up. She fought for every moment of fun. Her accomplishments may seem small to you, but they are on a grand scale to me.

Just as Jackie jumped into my arms, I could picture her jumping into the arms of her Heavenly Father on that fateful day.

And that's all I have to say about that.

### **Prayer**

Heavenly Father, thank you that you help us in our weakness. Thank you that your Spirit intercedes for us when we don't know what to pray. Thank you that through faith we too can bounce back from our losses. Thank you that in all these you work things together for good and that as a result we are more than conquerors through Christ who loved us. And thank you that nothing can separate us from your love. Amen.

**THE END**