

FROM: TRAUMA & RESILIENCE - A HANDBOOK SPIRITUAL RESOURCES IN DEALING WITH TRAUMA

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When a drunk driver devastated Jerry Sittser's life by killing three family members and injuring others, Jerry was bewildered by confusing thoughts and a host of intense feelings (Story 4). Pain, grief, sorrow, anger, fear, and puzzlement were often overwhelming. His slow recovery was aided by certain strengths that supported him through this crisis. Jerry's faith was strong. He also leaned on solid, close friendships, and a strong connection to a Christian community. Friends listened to his feelings without trying to change them. Knowledge of psalms of lament reminded Jerry that voicing strong, raw emotions before God is acceptable. Jerry also needed to make sense of the traumatic incident and its impact on his overall understanding of life and God. He grappled with serious questions: Is there a God? Is God truly in control? Is there a universal morality? He entered a process of "wrapping his mind around" a world that had changed profoundly for him.

In retrospect, many years after the accident, Jerry points at the trauma-induced scar on his life that became a mark of grace. He noticed that his emotional life had deepened, that he had new clarity about what really matters, and renewed determination to dedicate himself to what matters most. After much doubting and grappling, Jerry found renewed confidence in his faith. He came to know God and his grace in a new, deeper way.

As with Jerry, severe trauma abruptly forces people out of their emotional and intellectual stability. In *Facilitating Posttraumatic Growth*, Calhoun and Tedeschi (Calhoun and Tedeschi, 1999, 2) metaphorically describe severe trauma as events with "seismic" impact on a person's worldview and emotional functioning. Like an earthquake, trauma vehemently shakes up, and often shatters the person's understanding of the world.

Trauma, in this chapter, refers to experiences that people go through or witness involving either serious injury, death, or threat of dying. Either they themselves are affected, or their family and close friends. Reactions to severe trauma typically include fear, helplessness, or horror. Examples of such traumatic events are accidents with physical injury or death; natural disasters resulting in threats of injury or death; diagnoses of life-threatening diseases; miscarriage or stillbirth; and violence, such as robbery, carjacking, rape, and exposure to civil unrest or war. There are other traumatic situations such as unemployment, loss of property, homelessness, divorce, and ongoing high levels of stress that take a toll. These are not the focus of our considerations here. However, much of what we discuss also applies to these painful issues.

Trauma shakes up a person's deepest convictions about the purpose and meaning of life, and raises questions about one's view of God. Christians in ministry, whose relationship with God is the foundation of their lives, can be especially challenged. Questions can erupt such as: Why does God allow suffering? Is God indeed good when he apparently allows evil? Is belief in a loving and all-powerful God consistent with the suffering in the world? Trying to make theological sense of world tragedies, including the incomprehensible massacre at Virginia Tech in 2007, Philip Yancey asks, "What good is God?" (Yancey, 2010). Tragedies challenge the concept of God we have known and relied upon. Does God care? Will he respond to our needs and the needs of those we care about? Can we bring our confusion, disappointment, or frustration before God? Or, would God be angered and abandon or punish us in the midst of our deepest

pain? Does God want us to only trust and defer to him? Or, can we still face him with honesty and dignity? Trauma can alter our sense of vision and purpose in ministry. After loss, hurt, or betrayal it is common to wonder: Is it worth it? Are *they* (the people ministered to) worth it? Does it make sense to give up so much? Can ministry have any meaningful impact here? How can God want me to continue when I am weak and failing?

When trauma pushes us into emotional turmoil and confusion about life's deepest questions, shaking our very foundations, we become vulnerable. Previously comforting beliefs can take a beating. As we struggle through puzzlement, pieces of our belief system eventually become rearranged. Crisis creates an opportunity for new construction and more solid foundations. Picture what occurs when houses are rebuilt after a natural disaster. Some parts of the old house may come to good use in the new one. Some may not be useful any more. Some foundations may require rebuilding. Rebuilding can result in a structure that is less solid, equally solid, or even more solid than the one before. Similarly, after the personal and spiritual reconstruction process following a crisis, people might emerge more fragile, as strong as before, or stronger and more resilient. Considering this process of shattering, struggling, and reconstructing, the questions arise: What characteristics increase resilience in the face of trauma-induced emotional and spiritual challenges? Are there ways to better prepare for them? What factors determine how we move through this emotional and spiritual vulnerability?

Resilience describes a person's ability to "bounce back" after an impact. It assumes a trauma-induced "loss of shape," which will be restored later. Resilient persons regain their prior constitution after the impact. Many factors determine resilience: biological, psychological, social, and spiritual. This chapter focuses on spiritual factors that enhance resilience.

Our *Christian faith* is relational in nature, a personal, covenantal bond between us and God who created and loves us. In Jesus Christ, God suffered and died on the cross for our sins so that we can receive newness of spiritual life. God lives in us and transforms us through the Holy Spirit. We want to love and honor God as we pursue his kingdom purposes in the power of his Spirit. We ultimately expect to be eternally connected with him in love and worship. The purpose and meaning of our lives are built on this relationship with God; this is described scientifically as "intrinsic religiosity." Trauma can break this essential relationship. Christians may experience this breaking like the proverbial rug being pulled out from under them. Spiritual resilience is determined by the probability that one's connection with God will be restored and even strengthened after an impact.

Certain *spiritual characteristics* make us more resilient. An acquired healthy biblical theology of suffering provides a sturdy framework of support through inevitable struggles after trauma. A practiced ability to forgive will facilitate letting go of debilitating anger, hurt, bitterness, and resentment after violent crises. Familiarity with accepting and expressing strong feelings in relationship with God and others will allow connecting, healing, and regaining hope more quickly after adversity. Security and openness in a few relationships, particularly with other believers, will provide a much needed safe place to sustain in vulnerable times.

For a person in the midst of the "seismic impact" of posttraumatic struggle, certain *spiritual resources* help the rebuilding process, often establishing deeper foundations. Experiencing God's presence in "the valley of the shadows," however weak or veiled, is key to assuring Christian believers of the enduring relationship with the author and sustainer of their lives. Expressing strong feelings in lament to God is a way to reconnect with him. Finding a path from anger and bitterness to true forgiveness frees the person from being trapped in an ongoing, self-destructive bond to the painful past. Experiencing God's grace can help someone rebound from the self-

condemnation that trauma can cause.

Those who go through struggle and rebuilding well will reap growth in the process. *Posttraumatic growth* describes positive changes after trauma, changes in how we see ourselves and relationships, and how we understand God, the world, or life's purpose and meaning. Posttraumatic growth increases future resilience.

In this section we will first look at *spiritual characteristics* that increase the resilience of Christians *before* they venture into a high-risk situation. We will consider how these characteristics can be strengthened in preparation for challenge. Then we will look at *spiritual resources* that will help *in the midst* of spiritual struggles after trauma. Those who prepare others for ministry may find the "Spiritual Resilience Checklist" (on the Training Resources tab of www.traumaresilience.org) helpful in orientation programs or as a tool for assessing spiritual resilience in candidates for ministry. Those caring for people *after* trauma will find particularly relevant resources in the second section of this chapter. The distinction between spiritual characteristics and spiritual resources is not clear-cut. They influence each other. Spiritual characteristics affect the resourcefulness of people as they move through struggle. And, familiarity with spiritual resources such as lament and the forgiveness process will improve spiritual resilience.

1. SPIRITUAL CHARACTERISTICS OF RESILIENT PERSONS

A. A Sound Theology of Suffering

After unexpected suffering, people are not only challenged to cope with immediate distress and practical problems, but also need to somehow "make sense" of everything. However, what happened may not "make sense" in light of the person's beliefs and expectations. Basic assumptions generally help to attribute meaning to events from a larger framework. Assumptions, as part of a worldview, provide a sense of order, security, orientation, and control. They help interpret new and unusual experiences, which aids adjustment. Religious faith is the overarching framework a believer has to understand the world and find meaning. It provides a lens for understanding the purpose of events and of life as a whole. This understanding generates motivation and vigor for purposeful living.

When an event does not "make sense" within a person's current understanding, confusion, disorientation, a sense of unfairness, unpredictability, and vulnerability will result. The once clear life purpose may turn to uncertainty. Energy and focus gained from a prior clear purpose may be weakened or gone. The person may instead feel like a sailboat adrift on a vast ocean without its compass.

Research Model of Religious Coping after Trauma

Research-based models of coping after trauma have determined that discrepancy between prior assumptions and the understanding of a new event causes distress. The more discrepancy between assumptions and understanding increases, the more distress. This can mean a keen sense of disorientation, loss of control, predictability, or comprehensibility of the world. Crystal Park, a researcher of religious coping, found that reducing discrepancy increases the likelihood of recovery. Discrepancy reduction is possible by changing how the event itself is understood,

adjusting global beliefs and goals, or both (Park, 2005). Large discrepancies challenge people to redefine or remodel many of their prior assumptions. Redefining facilitates adjustment, and allows integration of a specific negative experience into a person's global understanding. Better integration will bring about lower levels of depression, higher levels of subjective well-being, and posttraumatic growth.

Theology of Suffering and Discrepancy

A sound theology of suffering will help reduce discrepancy by means of biblically realistic expectations of God. It will also help restore a sense of ultimate security and control. For Christians this sense of security is often found in accepting that God is ultimately in control. A biblical theology of suffering offers reassurance that God is still "good" and "working things out for good." A minister, missionary, or Christian disciple will be less confused in crises when she or he has already grappled with a personal theology of suffering. Teaching missionary and clergy candidates a theology of suffering is fine, but their personal heart-level exploration of beliefs about suffering is the most solid foundation for their resilience. This would involve personal study of relevant texts, small group discussions, and asking difficult, controversial questions. Otherwise, it will remain shallow head knowledge and will not provide sufficient emotional and spiritual support later. To support such a process Scott Shaum has prepared a *Worksheet: Toward a Theology of Risk and Suffering* (Appendix A).

Even equipped with the best theology of suffering, people in ministry will face heart-level struggles after severe trauma. In the midst of these struggles their self-understanding and grasp of the purpose of life will usually deepen. Though there is a real risk of alienation from God during these struggles, fortunately, for most they will bring about the possibility of coming to know God in a new, deeper way.

B. Intrinsic Religious Motivation

Trauma challenges faith and how we know God. The outcome is influenced by the centrality of faith in a person's life. As a Christian's faith grows stronger, it becomes the lens through which trauma is viewed. Faith is also a deep reservoir of spiritual nourishment when we are in need. For a Christian, the degree of love for God and the extent to which personal purpose and meaning is found in relationship with God is key for resilience.

Religious motivation is the most important spiritual characteristic determining how Christians experience trauma. Motivation is distinct from beliefs and practices that make up overall faith, although they are interrelated. Motivation describes the drive behind a Christian's faith in God. Christians pursue faith for many different reasons.

There are two kinds of religious motivation: viewing religion as an end in itself, or as means to another end. *Intrinsic religious motivation* views relationship with God and its sense of purpose and meaning as an end in itself. Christians with this motivation love God because he is God, because he loves them, and because he has died for them. These thoughts inform their choices.

Another motivation for Christians to pursue their faith is it is a means to fulfill other personal desires. They view participation in religion as just one part of life, and value the benefits that

come with it. For example, religious practice and commitment can provide security, community, happiness, comfort, health, and prosperity.

These two kinds of motivation are not opposite ends of a continuum, nor are they mutually exclusive. Christians might have both at the same time; with one stronger than the other. Intrinsic religiousness tends to be stronger in those who have solid beliefs and commitments to their faith; whereas, seeking fulfillment of other desires through the practice of faith is not tied to the strength of the person's belief and commitment (Donahue, 1986).

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's response to King Nebuchadnezzar is a good example of how religious motivations influenced decisions (Dan 3). The three young men had been appointed over the affairs of Babylon through Daniel's God-given interpretation of the king's dream. They knew their power and wealth had come through their relationship with God and other believers, and that God was capable of intervening and providing. Nebuchadnezzar threatened to throw them into a fiery furnace if they did not serve his gods or worship the golden image he created. However, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego demonstrated that their greatest motivation to worship God was intrinsic, not for status and safety. They would serve God regardless, with the knowledge that God could deliver them. Their motivation was the belief that God was the only one worthy of worship.

Nebuchadnezzar answered and said to them, "Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up? Now if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, well and good. But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?" Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up," (Dan 3:14-18, ESV).

Deep spiritual resources assured Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that God would be with them regardless. When they came out unscathed, King Nebuchadnezzar also began to worship God because he recognized the deliverance of those who chose death over worship of a false god.

When our lives are out of control, belief in God's purpose and promise to be with us (intrinsic religious motivation), can provide steadiness and comfort. Karen Carr experienced this in the weeks following her evacuation from fighting in Ivory Coast. She wrote:

I cried, I asked questions that didn't have answers like, "Why did God allow this to happen?" I went back to the roots of why I was there (God gave me a love for missionaries and called me to this work). Those roots were deep and enduring and assured me that God would equip me to do the work he had called me to do. It wasn't about my strength or energy or will, really. It was about knowing that this was exactly what I was supposed to do. Motivated by love for the people I was helping and joy in doing so, I could keep on going" (Story 1).

When trauma makes us feel helpless, we look for security trusting in God's control, care, and love. Sometimes violence, loss, and tragedy do not make any sense at all. They seem impossible to reconcile with God's love, as initially was the case for Jerry Sittser when he lost three family members (Story 4). Our belief that God loves us and is working his purposes in and through our lives is a steadying source of comfort, hope, and purpose as we endure pain.

Trauma has the potential to cause distress in the form of depression, anxiety, and powerlessness. Research shows that people with intrinsic religious motivation tend to be less depressed by trauma and are more apt to recover sooner (Smith, McCullough and Poll, 2003). They also feel a greater sense of purpose and influence over outcomes, rather than helplessness. Religiousness and mental health are more powerfully linked as one moves from institutional religiosity (extrinsic motivation, participation in church services or activities, ritualized prayer) to personal devotion (intrinsic motivation, emotional attachment to God, devotional intensity, and colloquial prayer) (Hackney and Sanders, 2003).

Engaging Intrinsic Religiousness

Intrinsic religious motivation contributes strongly to better long-term mental health for people who have come through highly stressful life events (Smith, McCullough and Poll, 2003; Schaefer, Blazer and Koenig, 2008). People with strong intrinsic motivation are more likely to make positive changes and grow during the struggle after trauma. They tend to have greater personal strength, deeper personal relationships, greater appreciation of life, and more spiritual growth. These benefits are so remarkable that the American military advocates attention to soldiers' spirituality in cases of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Pargament and Sweeney, 2011). This underscores the importance of engaging spiritual resources for resilience and healing when caring for Christians after trauma.

Most Christians in ministry have a strong intrinsic religious motivation when they start out. Their roles play out the purpose and meaning provided by their faith. However, the challenges and pressures in certain ministry positions may erode some of that strength. Since intrinsic religiosity fosters resilience, Christian ministry leaders need to assess, maintain, and strengthen it. Leaders can look for intrinsic motivation by asking about candidates' sense of call and the reasons behind their desire to serve. They can listen for purpose and meaning coming from candidates' relationship with God. To maintain and strengthen intrinsic religiosity, ministry leaders can encourage activities to nurture love for God and awareness of God's presence, such as community worship, music, and prayer. They can foster sharing among staff members about God's work. Mutual support and caring is a tangible expression and reminder of God's love. The priority of personal devotions can be modeled and promoted. Bible studies around topics such as God's character, forgiveness, and grace are reminders of God's love and challenge ministers to incorporate those principles. Christian ministry workers might take regular spiritual retreats with worship, contemplative prayer, spiritual direction, and applied Bible study. Fasting with prayer is another discipline that can draw us away from busyness to focus on God.

Even after trauma, intrinsic motivation can be strengthened. As a caregiver, pay special attention to how someone's experience has affected their faith. How did he or she previously find spiritual focus and comfort? A caregiver could encourage the person to spend some time in those familiar ways. Caregivers can listen for healthy religious beliefs and practices, and urge taking refuge in them. Continued participation in worship, prayer, and personal devotion is desirable. Others may join supportively in these practices as the person reaches out to God. Caregivers can elicit responses from traumatized persons about how they believe God has been acting in their

lives, even in their pain. Talking about their experiences of God helps people to be more aware of God's presence. Demonstrating an active interest in their spirituality and not avoiding the issues gives the traumatized person an invitation to talk and to grow.

ACTIVITIES THAT PROMOTE INTRINSIC RELIGIOSITY

- **Participating in community worship and prayer**
- **Sharing within the community about God's involvement in their lives**
- **Experiencing God's love through mutual support and caring**
- **Engaging in personal devotions**
- **Participating in Bible study that seeks to know God's character, forgiveness, and grace**
- **Joining spiritual retreats with worship, prayer, spiritual direction, and Bible study**
- **Taking part in individual and communal practice of fasting with prayer**

C. Facing and Sharing Uncomfortable Feelings

Acknowledging and voicing uncomfortable emotions is essential for dealing constructively with trauma-related distress. Unfortunately, that is not a characteristic of all present-day conservative Christian churches or organizations. There may be expectations that those who are "right with Christ" and have "enough faith" do not have negative feelings. Consequently, people expressing sorrow, pain, sadness, doubt, or anger (in the American context often described as "negative" emotions) can attract disapproval or even condemnation from fellow believers. Struggling believers may buy into this and think their feelings are due to weak faith or being a "bad" Christian. Others may assume their feelings are sinful or shameful. Understandably, these people hide negative emotions or, even worse, deny them.

In the second part of this section we will explore lament in the spiritual tradition of Israel and, in a broader sense, all people of God. In lament, believers bring agony, sorrow, sadness, anger, and desire for revenge before God. This may happen privately or in community. The spiritual tradition of lament shows that feeling and expressing pain is not a mark of weak faith, being a "bad" Christian, sinful, or shameful. In fact, courage and trust that our relationship with God is anchored in his faithfulness are the virtues needed to confront and communicate troubled feelings in God's presence.

Promoting authentic Christian church and mission communities that welcome expression of all kinds of emotions lays a solid foundation for surviving rough life events. It allows for spiritual growth to spring forth from honest wrestling. Practice grounds include small groups, intercessory teams, and healing prayer ministries.

D. Knowing and Extending Forgiveness

Interpersonal crimes such as assault, robbery, carjacking, rape, or terrorism generate powerful feelings of anger and desire for justice. Initially, a solid “fight response” is necessary for self-protection. However, lingering hostility will drain emotional and physical resources needed for healing. Research has found that long-term hostility and resentment is linked to greater mental, emotional, and physical distress (Luskin, 2002, 77-93). In contrast, those able to extend forgiveness after violent trauma are less distressed.

How are people able to forgive? Christians believe they are forgiven for their wrongdoing, since Jesus Christ took the just punishment for it upon himself. Having received forgiveness opens minds and hearts to offer the same to others. The Lord’s Prayer infers that forgiving others is connected to having first been forgiven. Commitment to the regular practice of forgiving “debtors” and “trespassers” is great preparation for extreme situations that put forgiveness to the test. Most people have some grievances with parents, siblings, spouses, or friends, which provides practice opportunities.

ABILITY TO FORGIVE

People will be better prepared to forgive, if they have

- accepted and continually received forgiveness from God and others,
- a biblical understanding of the forgiveness process, and
- extended forgiveness to others on a regular basis, not harboring resentment.

E. Knowing and Receiving Grace

Christians in ministry typically have a strong desire to please God. They are often hardy and “strong” people. Many hold themselves to high professional and personal standards. This is good, unless they get swept away into heroism or perfectionism in which redemption is manufactured without the power and grace of the Redeemer. Stand-alone heroism increases vulnerability to feeling like a failure when things go wrong. A sense of not being “good enough” or “worth it” is the result. Shame, self-condemnation, and withdrawal from God and others can result. In survival mode after crisis, people will not always make the best possible decisions, nor will they be in “good shape” when affected by confusion, stress, and depression. In fact, they may be weaker than ever before. Accepting vulnerability and weakness without undue self-contempt is both reasonable and resilient.

Knowing and receiving grace can help people rebound. If a church or mission acknowledges normal human failure and weakness, and supports its members compassionately, it will provide an environment for receiving grace. Along with this, members need to be aware of their own limitations. Accepting these limitations and looking to God’s grace will help to rebound quicker and to put more trust in God. Harsh self-judgment erodes emotional strength. True perfection in

the Christian sense comes from the one who said, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9, NIV).

F. Supportive Relationships With Other Believers

Human resilience depends on the ability to closely connect with at least a few other people. Openness and vulnerability allow for the kind of depth in relationships that encourages truly facing and moving beyond struggles. Such close connections grow in friendships, prayer partnerships, spiritual mentoring, and small groups. In these relationships, people support each other “in the thick of things.” Research has shown that Christians become more resilient by regularly engaging with their faith communities in worship and mutual, caring support.

Resilient people are more *interdependent* than *independent*. When life hits hard, they entrust themselves to others and accept help and support. People in ministry are often “on stage,” which makes it risky to be vulnerable. They frequently have high workloads, with only limited time for nurturing friendships. Though many want and appreciate close relationships, not everyone gives forming and maintaining those bonds a priority. Understanding the importance of keeping personal and ministry life in balance nowadays leads more Christian workers to allow themselves the time and pleasure for close relationships with at least a few others. In these kinds of relationships vulnerability is lived and practiced. Though all good close relationships provide support and comfort, those where faith and purpose are shared are the ones in which Christians can most honestly wrestle and pray, allowing understanding to deepen when trauma raises questions about the foundations of faith.

G. Strengthening Spiritual Resilience in Preparation for Risk

In this section we have reviewed the important spiritual characteristics of people who are more resilient when faced with trauma. Fostering these qualities in individuals, churches, and mission organizations better prepares them for the emotional and spiritual impact of trauma. A summary of these characteristics appears in the *Spiritual Resilience Checklist*.

SPIRITUAL RESILIENCE CHECKLIST

Sound Theology of Suffering

- Has the person (have I) grappled with his or her (my) theology of suffering and are the resulting assumptions biblical?
- Does our (my) organization encourage and promote a sound theology of suffering?

Intrinsic Religious Motivation

- Does the person (do I) have a habit of attending community worship and prayer?
- Does the person (do I) have at least two close Christian friends for mutual support and sharing openly and deeply?
- Does the person (do I) have a regular habit of personal prayer and studying the Bible?
- Does the person (do I) have a regular practice of participating in spiritual retreats, contemplative prayer, and receiving spiritual direction?

Ability to Face and Share Uncomfortable Feelings

- Is the person (am I) authentically and honestly talking about difficult life experiences and surrounding feelings?
- Does our (my) organization support honest sharing of uncomfortable feelings, or are there indirectly communicated messages that “good Christians” should not have certain feelings?

Knowing and Extending Forgiveness

- Does the person (do I) have experiential knowledge of receiving forgiveness from God and from others?
- Is the person (am I) aware of the forgiveness process and able to distinguish forgiving from excusing or glossing over injuries?
- Does our (my) organization encourage and promote giving, experiencing, and knowing forgiveness?

Knowing and Receiving Grace

- Does the person (do I) have a deep experience of being loved and valued by God?
- Is the person (am I) accepting of human brokenness as a common experience and able to love others (myself) when the brokenness is visible, rather than being overly condemning?
- Does our (my) organization encourage a culture of openness, vulnerability, and support as its members deal with their brokenness?

Supportive Relationships with Other Believers

- Does this person have at least two close Christian friends?
- Does this person give growing and maintaining close relationships a measure of priority over ministry work?

2. RESOURCES FOR THE SPIRITUAL STRUGGLE

Strengthening spiritual resilience is an excellent preparation to better handle what may lie ahead. Preparing well includes reflecting on a personal theology of suffering, deepening spiritual life and motivation, understanding and practicing forgiveness, growing in sharing uncomfortable feelings, and giving priority to building friendships with other Christians. However, in the midst of tests and tribulations even more is necessary.

In the vulnerability and confusion after a traumatic crisis, it is necessary to rely on God and others in a new way that does not come naturally when life “works out.” This necessity most often leads to new discoveries. However, some get stuck in the challenge. Suffering can either “burn” people spiritually or become the Holy Ground of deepening faith. This ground can be a place of a transformation upon which shattered fragments reassemble into a new, God honoring order.

How can people meet the challenges of a crisis, experience transformation, and grow spiritually? Reliable spiritual resources are necessary to support a person in the “valley of the shadow” of spiritual struggle (Ps 23:4, ESV). This section is about those essential spiritual resources for the struggle after trauma.

A. Knowing God’s Presence

There is nothing more important and comforting for Christians in crisis than to realize that God is right there with them. The Bible is full of assuring reminders that God is always with us. The number of these passages is evidence how much humans need this assurance. It is often hard to be aware of God’s presence in frightening situations. Trauma survivors know that in spite of their firm belief that God is with them no matter what, there were times when it was hard to hold on to that belief and to actually feel it. Some will not find God’s presence for a season and others may seem to lose their sense of connection to God forever. Fortunately, most will know God’s presence again before long. Those who support Christian believers in crises recognize that people experience God’s presence in very different ways.

When Daniel and Lydia (Story 2) were in a life-threatening health crisis their friends and church community gathered around them immediately. They provided practical support, prayer, shoulders to cry on, and company in lonely moments. Their friends were often simply present. They acknowledged their pain and literally lived through the crisis together with them. Being surrounded by caring people was the most tangible evidence of God’s presence Lydia had ever known. For Daniel, God’s presence started in a solitary moment when his glance fell on a Holy Trinity icon. This moment brought to him a vision and promise that he, Daniel, was invited into the fellowship of the Holy Trinity as he started traveling a road with no clear end in sight.

In another scenario, Amanda (not her real name) and her husband worked in medical mission in a developing country. Both loved their children dearly. Confusion and darkness fell over Amanda when they suddenly lost a child due to serious illness. Amanda initially lost her connection to God. She also lost closeness to caring people in her ministry context and circle of friends. People attempting to get close were mostly shut out. Only a few were allowed into her inner world of hurt, disappointment, and bitterness. Her husband was allowed in, but he was

eyed with suspicion and sometimes greeted with irritation. Amanda's heart was crying out for understanding in the midst of hurt and anger, and this was hard for her to find. So, she did not want to talk, keeping to herself with brooding thoughts and dark feelings. This dark place with the pain of her longing and the refusal to accept her child's death seemed to be where she could still connect with her lost child, and feel some sense of control over what otherwise appeared completely out of her hands. She wondered whether letting go of the pain would betray the child she loved. When Amanda realized that God was in pain with her, grieving the loss of her child, deeply understanding her experience, a small light began to shine into her darkness.

God's presence signals that we are not lost even in the most chaotic and painful situations. It confirms that our lives are under divine control, even though they seem out of control to human senses. Knowing that God is present assures us that he understands the pain. But how can God's presence become real in the confusion and darkness that follows trauma? How can his presence be experienced when it is hard even to conceive of it?

B. Knowing God's Presence: Through Others

Many have testified to the powerful way a caring community has helped them to feel that God was with them. The tangible presence of caring people conveys love and comfort that point to the love of God.

Ability of Caregivers to Be Present

Many desire to "be there" and "be present" with trauma victims. Still, entering into their world can be daunting. Being with someone in pain means allowing ourselves to be affected by the pain and confusion the victim feels, though to a lesser extent. Because of this the temptation for caregivers is to "fix" the pain. Fixing relieves the pressure of wanting to help the other feel better. It makes supporters feel useful and more in control. But, fixing does not reach deep enough to heal. Most of us remember a time when a well-meaning person offered quick, spiritual-sounding advice or a shallow comment intended to comfort. It didn't work. We felt pacified, dismissed, or misunderstood. Many also remember precious moments when somebody entered into our pain by listening well or touching gently. Vulnerable sharing and attentive listening can create a connection that is rarely known otherwise. The shared grief and pain in the caregiver's expression acknowledges and validates that of the afflicted and makes it easier to bear. When supporters join people in their pain, confusion, and vulnerability, they step onto "Holy Ground." There they join with the person in reverence to the Lord in what he may be doing.

Ability to Receive Support

Caregivers will be familiar with situations when they were more than willing to "enter into" someone else's emotional and spiritual distress and "be present," only to be locked out. What can be done if the door is closed or even slammed shut in the caregiver's face? Self-examination is a good place to start, including considering whether or not they are the best ones to offer help in that situation (please refer to *Caregiver Self-Reflection When a Person Withdraws*).

CAREGIVER SELF-REFLECTION WHEN A PERSON WITHDRAWS

- Could I be unduly concerned about making the person feel better rather than listening, understanding, and being him or her?
- Did I offer suggestions too quickly when the person was not ready to receive them and perhaps felt misunderstood or hurt?
- Am I overly focused on talking to the person rather than reaching out in a more holistic manner, such as offering items or help they need? How can I provide them with comfort?
- Am I the best person to reach out to this person in need? E.g., if a woman has been raped, the presence of a woman would generally feel safer to the victim than a man. Is there another person more trusted by the traumatized person than I?

If attempts to reach out to the person do not open the door, the reason may not have anything to do with the caregiver. Some traumatized people feel so vulnerable or so overstimulated, that all they can do is withdraw. Each attempt to get close might feel to them like an intrusion, and may be met with irritation. Patterns of response caused by past hurts often are activated by a new traumatic incident. Also, past experiences with others will affect how traumatized men and women receive and interpret helpers. Common reasons for withdrawal are a strong sense of vulnerability, shame, unresolved anger, or depression.

To complicate matters, not all who withdraw actually want others to leave them alone. A person who suffered severe loss once said, "Though I refused invitations and attempts of other people to talk to me, I also did not want them to give up on me." Though she refused, she needed to know that her friends and family were still interested, attentive, loving and caring for her. Being gradually convinced, she eventually opened the door an inch at a time.

Interpersonal violence may cause victims to be especially mistrustful. They need to rebuild trust slowly. The children's story, "The Little Prince," by Antoine de Saint Exupéry, can help us picture the gradual process required. The little prince is trying to build a relationship with a shy, fearful fox. The fox instructs him to be patient and use a cautious, gradual approach: "First you will sit down at a little distance from me. . . I shall look at you out of the corner of my eye, and you will say nothing. . . But you will sit a little closer to me, every day . . ." (de Saint Exupéry, 2000). A strategy of regular contacts, however short and seemingly insignificant, often helps with somebody who has withdrawn. Don't take angry outbursts personally; rather understand this as a defensive wall that makes the person feel less vulnerable when "holding it together" is difficult.

C. Knowing God's Presence: Intercession

By presenting the person and situation before God in prayer, Christian believers take on a priestly role. Even if the one in crisis feels unable to approach God personally, the support team bridges that gap by bringing him or her before God in prayer. Letting him know that others are praying on his behalf often provides special comfort. In addition to human prayers, Christ

himself steps into the gap and intercedes in the spiritual realm. The Holy Spirit also is active by bringing one's deepest concerns, even those expressed in groans, before the Most High (Rom 8:27, NIV). Realizing that others pray can encourage those in pain, especially when they feel a rift in their connection with God.

Early in his ministry, Paul ran into strong opposition in Lystra and was eventually stoned. He was dragged outside the city and others assumed he was dead. The biblical account says, "But, after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city" (Acts 14: 19b–20, NIV). This very short account is a powerful image of what happens when believers "gather around" a person in pain. Gathering, with or without words, creates an instant sense of connection, nurture, comfort, order, and hope. It is like a form of concrete prayer when believers act out God's intent to be close to those who suffer; and its effects are powerful.

D. Seeking God's Presence: Rituals

Religious rituals symbolize and enact spiritual reality. They render supernatural reality in a concrete way, involving minds, hearts, and senses, thus bringing the spiritual realm close. Rituals are particularly beneficial at times when holding on to spiritual truths is difficult. During life's storms, rituals can become an anchor for distressed souls. Rituals also connect members of a community. Familiar rituals can be used or new ones created for special purposes. Which rituals are particularly helpful in supporting Christians after trauma?

Holy Communion

Since a person in crisis may feel distant from God, taking communion individually or with a group can help one literally taste God's presence. People often feel buoyed in their faith and assured of God's faithfulness when they receive communion. During communion they may meditate on the suffering of Christ and realize that he knows and understands their suffering. Those who feel guilt can release it in the knowledge of flesh and blood given for them. Taking communion together can renew the connection to one's community of faith.

Candlelight Vigils

Candlelight vigils are sometimes used to protest injustice, stand witness to suffering, or commemorate lives lost in accidents, natural disaster, massacre, or disease. They often symbolize sorrow for the deceased. In this sense, candlelight vigils are enacted lament. They can be held in silence with memorabilia and pictures at hand, or with prayer, song, and other expressions of lament.

Tributes for the Deceased

Tributes for the deceased are common. They can be expressed in a variety of ways: writing notes or cards, presenting flowers, favorite items, evidence of accomplishments, or displaying pictures of the deceased. Today, electronic tributes can assist mourning in a scattered community; examples are a website or Facebook page in honor of the deceased. Such tributes can also be very comforting for the family.

When loss has affected a certain geographic community, a special meeting can be arranged to remember and support each other in grief. Providing a ritualized expression of sorrow and grief

will help people express their feelings and move beyond them with the resonance and support of community.

Forgiveness Rituals

Letting go of resentment and bitterness against those who caused harm is hard. Performing a symbolic act of willingness to forgive can help people overcome inner resistance, or make forgiveness more “real” for them. Despite their desire to forgive, people may find themselves “taking back” forgiveness again and again. A forgiveness ritual can help remember a special moment of willingness, and encourage walking the same path of forgiving again...and again.

The Mobile Member Care Team in West Africa introduces missionary peer-responders to a simple, powerful forgiveness ritual gleaned from Dr. Rhiannon Lloyd’s Healing-the-Wounds-of-Trauma workshop. A large, plain wooden cross is constructed. People are invited to write on slips of paper issues of resentment they wish to release. They can share those with another believer if they wish. Otherwise, they fold up their note and, one by one, take a hammer and nail it to the cross. Doing this, they symbolically let go of their resentment through intentional forgiveness.

Leave-taking Ritual

Needing to leave a home or area abruptly due to natural disaster or civil war does not allow much time to grieve. A leave-taking ritual assists the process. A floor plan of the home is roughly drawn. A lighted candle can symbolize a final walk through important rooms of the house. In each room, participants commemorate special events and offer thanksgiving. Then the room is released into God’s hands and to new owners.

Home Restoration Ritual

Homes that have been burglarized or robbed can feel “soiled” and invaded by something evil. A restoration ritual can reclaim the atmosphere and character of the home. One way to do this is to use fragrances or fresh flowers and enjoy them in the house together. The home can be restored with words such as: “This is a home of kindness and generosity, of welcome and hospitality, of friendship and relationship, a home for cooking and sharing, and a home dedicated to God and his people.” The scents, words, and prayer re-consecrate the house. Prayers for protection could follow, along with prayer for those violated and, if appropriate, for the burglar or robber.

E. Obstacles to Knowing God’s Presence

Caring support, intercessory prayer, and rituals bring God’s presence and love closer to those in crisis. However, some perceptions and emotions can jeopardize or even block awareness of God’s presence after a major life event. These include the sense of being punished or abandoned by God, and feelings of guilt and shame. Caregivers need to address these potential obstacles.

Sense of Being Punished by God

When a woman’s husband suddenly died, she thought this was due to an omission on her part, and therefore surely punishment from God. So, she withdrew from God and those around her.

After earthquakes and tsunamis, spiritual leaders have been asked whether the disaster was divine punishment. Sometimes leaders have said that the disaster was indeed God's wrath for disobedience and spiritual inattention. Research shows that people who perceive suffering as God's punishment have more difficulty coping and suffer more depression and posttraumatic stress. The Bible indicates that suffering came with the fall and can be a consequence of human disobedience. But when Jesus was asked about a man born blind, "Who sinned, he or his parents?" He answered: "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him" (Jn 9: 2–3, ESV). Jesus' perspective on this issue is present and future directed, not focused on blame for past actions.

It is human nature to seek causes and explanations for suffering. When a person assumes that their wrongdoing caused the suffering, it is often an attempt to feel more secure and try to avoid problems in the future. By identifying a cause for the problem, people gain a sense of security, control, order, or justice. However, interpreting something as a punishment from God for personal wrongdoing comes at a very high price of guilt, shame, and distance from God and others. In contrast, Jesus speaks of God as revealing himself *in the midst* of a disturbing situation. This perspective draws one closer to God and turns attention to possibilities now and in the future. Caregivers can gently question notions of punishment, and encourage reflection on what God may be doing in the midst of the "mess."

Sense of Guilt and Shame

Recently traumatized people say things like, "If only I had done this, that, or the other, then it would not have happened," "If only I had realized and paid better attention," "If only I had taken time to drive the car more slowly," or "If only I had reacted more appropriately, my friend would not have been killed." An anxious woman unable to successfully resuscitate her unresponsive husband, once said: "If only I hadn't been so shocked and started the CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation) earlier, then my husband would not have died." Overwhelmed by realizing what happened, people ponder in hindsight how the incident could have been avoided, then move on to accuse themselves of omissions or commissions. The resulting self-accusation, guilt, and shame can drive a wedge between them and God.

If a person needs help overcoming false guilt and shame, rational discussion is apt to lead nowhere. An "*acknowledge and reframe*" strategy helps best in such situations. Caregivers can *acknowledge* the person's wish that the event never happened, and *reframe* that the bereaved did "the best they could." For example, one might tell the woman who "failed" her husband, "I know how much you wish you could have saved him. Anyone in your situation would have been in shock. You did the best you could in that moment and more than most others could." In this way it is possible to gently encourage people to accept grace for themselves. If the person is taking responsibility appropriately for an aspect of the trauma, that can be acknowledged, too, and then guide her or him onward toward forgiveness and grace. (Karen Carr elaborates in Section 2 C of this chapter about the *Acknowledge and Reframe* skill).

Sense of Being Abandoned by God

After her family's van collided with a truck in Rwanda, Ann felt that God had abandoned her (Story 3). If God promised to keep her family safe, and yet allowed this tragedy, she reasoned that he must have left the scene when the accident happened. When God does not act as expected people might think he has left them. When shock numbs emotions, or when someone drifts into

depression, the usual emotional cues of God's presence (peace and joy) are missing. It is then possible to feel abandoned because of the inability to feel these emotions. Believing that God has intentionally withdrawn makes it hard to take steps to reconnect with him. A person that feels abandoned may withdraw into sadness, loneliness, or despair.

Research indicates that those who feel abandoned by God have a harder time coping (Pargament et al., 1998). What can caregivers do? They can explore why the person feels abandoned by God. Is it the person's inaccurate understanding of what God should have done (theology of suffering), or could it be due to emotional numbing or depression? With such knowledge supporters are better equipped to address underlying concerns. Inappropriate expectations can be gently questioned. Or, an explanation can be provided about shock-induced numbing or depression-induced lack of joy and peace, but that lack of feelings does not mean that God is absent. The caregiver could then help the person find ways to reconnect with God, such as through the Lord's Supper, or lament.

F. Lament

While emotional distress and spiritual confusion after trauma threaten trust in God and awareness of his presence, some will feel that their relationship with God is disrupted. When pain, confusion, anxiety, sorrow, regret, and anger all erupt at once, some recoil, some are shocked and frozen, and others urgently cry out to God for help. In such a situation God remains the one we need the most. However, we may not feel comfortable expressing certain feelings to him. Here is where the practice of lament can become the turning point for healing.

Defining Lament

Lament is a "strong expression of sorrow, regret, or complaint to God in prayer or song, either individual or communal" (Fuller Youth Institute, 2008). As documented in the psalms, the Israelites prayed and sang to God in a great variety of life situations. Psalms expressing raw emotions such as hurt, confusion, upset, anger, hate, and abandonment have been distinguished as "psalms of lament" or "psalms of disorientation" (Brueggemann, 1984). Researcher Keith Meador found that highly religious people generally are more likely to express their emotions openly compared to others (Meador et al., 1992). Honest emotional expression facilitates coping with distress.

Looking more closely at the essential elements of lament in the Old Testament as well as the New, the following stands out:

1. *Recognition*: A clear recognition and honest acknowledgement of hurt.
2. *Invocation*: God is called upon to pay attention.
3. *Presentation*: Presenting to God a *specific* situation and voicing conflicting feelings such as pain, hurt, abandonment, shame, confusion, being overwhelmed, sadness, despair, anger, and struggle with God's seeming inaction or silence. At times, no words can be found, and crying or "groaning" become the only expressions (Rom 8:22, 23, 26, NIV). Jesus is described as "overwhelmed with sorrow" in Gethsemane (Mk 14:34,

NIV). He cries out feeling abandoned (“forsaken”) by the Father on the cross (Mk 15:34, using the lament of Ps 22:1, NIV).

4. *Expectation*: God is expected to hear, take the hurt in, and be affected by it. Brueggeman writes, “God takes the hurt of earth into God’s own life and *heaven* is thereby transformed” (Brueggemann, 1992, 47; italics mine).
5. *Anticipation*: God is expected to respond according to his promises. “God accepts the groan, takes it into God’s own person, and speaks it back to hurting Israel as promise from on high” (Brueggemann, 1992, 52). Anticipation that God will respond in concrete ways generates hope in the here-and-now. Beyond this, a larger perspective of hope opens up in eschatological redemption.
6. *Proclamation*: God is recognized and praised for who he is and for anticipated fulfillment of his promises. Almost all psalms of lament end in praise. In many psalms, lament and praise are intertwined; and the psalmist goes back and forth between them.
7. *Participation*: The community of believers enters into the lament of the individual, receiving the hurt and bearing it with the afflicted. The individual and community together find hope and God’s redemptive presence.

In lament we acknowledge distress over a painful occurrence and present it to God and the community; both are expected to pay attention, hear, and resonate. As God receives human pain into his heart and processes it in divine ways, he is expected to act according to who he is and to fulfill his promises now and at the end of time.

Engaging in Lament

Providing models of lament will aid people in praying or journaling personal lament. Biblical examples of the *psalms of lament* and a *simple structure of lament* (please refer to corresponding tables) are a good way to start. Another helpful model can also be found at www.Journey-Through-Grief.com. The most helpful expression of lament depends on the distressed person’s temperament. A more extraverted person may sit down and pray aloud to God using a simple structure, or voice concerns to a group. The group can then join the person in lament before God, perhaps prompted by a leader. A more introverted person may prefer to journal and at a later stage verbalize a prayer of lament before God.

PSALMS OF LAMENT

Individual Lament

- Psalm 3, 5, 6, 7, 13, 17, 22, 25, 26, 28, 31, 35, 38, 39, 42, 43, 51, 54, 55, 56, 57, 59, 61, 63, 64, 69, 71, 73, 77, 86, 88, 102, 109, 130, 142, 143

Communal Lament

- Psalm 44, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83

A SIMPLE STRUCTURE OF LAMENT

- Addressing God
- Presenting the situation, including feelings, and complaints
- Affirming trust based on past experience with God
- Presenting petitions, desires, or needs
- Presenting enemies and the need for justice
- Expressing expectation that God will hear and act according to his faithfulness and promises
- Praising God

Even with encouragement, modeling, and resourcing, some people will not be ready to express their feelings in words. Groans and cries may be all they have to offer up. After Jerry Sittser lost three family members in one accident, he found himself in this place. He wrote, “Groans became the only language I could use, if even that, but I believed it was language enough for God to understand” (Sittser, 2004, 43). In this place without words, the Holy Spirit is ready to provide support: “We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God” (Rom 8:26,27, NIV).

One word of caution about lament: Walter Brueggemann makes a distinction between “dwelling *on* loss” and “dwelling *in* loss.” Dwelling *on* loss leads to closing ourselves off, wrapped in “emotional knots,” which can lead to self-pity and weakening of constructive lament. Dwelling *in* loss leads to being honest, acknowledging loss, and attending to it, rather than denying it. People might dwell *on* loss due to a tendency to withdraw, occasionally to attract attention, or for the secondary gain of assuring that compassionate support will continue beyond the need. A trained counselor may need to address psychological issues in such a scenario.

Facing Anger and Disappointment

Many Christians will not have difficulty expressing pain, sorrow, confusion, abandonment, or even despair to God, but may be reluctant to express anger. Even encouraged by counselors, directing anger, frustration, disappointment, or accusations at God, may just not “feel right” for some people. However, they run the risk that hidden anger will alienate them from God. Friends and supporters can remind them that “God can handle those feelings,” that he is aware of any anger already, and continues to love them in spite of it. Even Jesus cried from the cross, “Why?” to the Father. Psalms of lament expressing anger and disappointment can encourage a person in pain to express these feelings to God. A psalm with complaints, accusation, anger, and questioning of God is Psalm 88. Job also openly questions and even confronts God about the suffering he has allowed. God receives and honors Job’s honesty, which actually is a hallmark of

trust and commitment to his relationship with God. After allowing Job to talk, question, and complain for a long time, God ultimately reveals his sovereignty and puts Job in his place as a human. Job receives a deeper knowledge of God through this struggle.

Theologian David Kelsey of Yale Divinity School is the father of an eight-year-old son with a serious illness that led to coma and disability due to brain damage. In his book, *Imagining Redemption*, David Kelsey reflects that though he was angry about his family's suffering, it was freeing for him to note that it was not anger *at* God, but *before* God. This allowed him "to recognize that acknowledging anger *before* God was not the same thing as expressing anger *at* God" (Kelsey, 2005, 29; italics mine). He also recognized that "asking Job's questions of God on behalf of Sam [his son] could be one way of being faithful to God in the midst of this awful situation rather than a way of blaming God for this terrible story" (Kelsey, 2005, 29; brackets mine).

Human anger does not come as a surprise to God, since he understands and resonates with it. In a mysterious way those who lament are joining God in his pain over the brokenness of all creation. Honest lament expresses more trust in God than withholding difficult feelings. From this perspective, expressing anger and vulnerability become a way of being faith-full and honoring God, a foundation for rebuilding connection and trust. Reframing anger as *before* God can make it easier for a reluctant person to express it. For example: If a woman, whose son tragically died, would say: "This hurts so much. I just cannot understand how God could allow this to happen," it is anger *before* God (a lament or complaint). However, if she said: "God just does not care. He is unfair. He should not let this happen to a good person like my son," she is angry *at* God, questioning his character. For those who are angry *at* God, offering up their anger as the best and only response at that moment can be cathartic and a starting point for a gradual restoration of trust.

Moments of vulnerable interaction with God after trauma are "holy ground," upon which someone in pain ultimately stands alone before God. This level of vulnerability and pain will at times be hard for caregivers to bear. They can assist, support, and come alongside. However, determining the right timing for anything to happen is "between the two of them." It is likely that more is happening internally than meets the outsider's eye. Supportively waiting for the "right time" allows the caregiver to witness the mystery of God's redeeming power.

Nicholas Woltersdorf, who lost his son to a mountain climbing accident, testifies about this mystery in his book *Lament for a Son*:

"In the valley of suffering, despair and bitterness are brewed. But there also character is made. The valley of suffering is the vale of soul-making" (Woltersdorf, 1987, 96-97).

Maintaining the long-term perspective that God is at work in the midst of "messiness," and not on a human time schedule, can help while "hanging in there" with someone in pain. Jerry Sittser experienced his journey of grief as practicing lament with his whole being:

"I did not go through the pain and come out on the other side; instead, I lived in it and found within that pain the grace to survive and eventually grow. I did not get over the loss of my loved ones; rather, I absorbed the loss into my life, like soil receives decaying matter, until it became a part of who I am. Sorrow took up permanent residence in my soul and enlarged it" (Sittser, 2004, 45-46).

Lament helps those who experienced trauma and loss to fully own their emotions and honestly connect with God from a place of vulnerability. Gradually, “enlargement,” “soul-making,” and renewed perspectives on God, self and life, will emerge. In accepting vulnerable feelings and reaching out in dialogue (or groaning) to God something new is created.

G. Forgiveness

Trauma can be so consuming that we want to know who or what is responsible for so much pain. Sometimes there is no one or nothing to hold accountable. In that case, lamenting our pain and grief is a way to heal by sharing. However, at times another person or a group of people *is* responsible for causing the pain. Perhaps the hurt was intentional or negligent. Either way, we blame them. When holding someone responsible, forgiveness is a key to the healing process.

Challenge of Forgiveness

Forgiveness seems crazy when one is hurt and afraid. It is not easy or even natural. It goes against the world’s common values of self-centeredness and competition. Hurt can be so bad that it will never be forgotten. Pain can be too intense to be ignored. Feelings of vulnerability, betrayal, or violation might be overwhelming. Deep feelings of insignificance may result when someone's devastation did not seem to matter to the person who caused it. Anger and hatred can quickly emerge, giving the injured person a feeling of strength, power over someone else, or hope for justice. Why would anybody want to give up judgment over someone who hurt them? It is natural to desire justice. Whoever caused such tremendous pain should feel at least as much pain in return! Or, it may seem easier to pretend that nothing really bad happened and bury the experience away somewhere. Neither of these common strategies to escape pain helps.

Forgiveness is difficult for many reasons. It is a vulnerable step because it acknowledges having been seriously hurt. It also means letting go of the desire to personally impose justice, judgment, and punishment. That is vulnerable! Forgiveness is especially hard when the perpetrator has not taken responsibility or felt remorse. Forgiveness doesn't seem deserved.

Reason for Forgiveness

Forgiveness seems unnatural when undeserved and brings even greater feelings of vulnerability. So, why forgive? Christians forgive because they have been forgiven (Col 3:13). God commands forgiveness (Lk 6:37). God forgave human sins even though it was not deserved. Willingness to forgive means acceptance of the need to repent and be forgiven ourselves, with submission to God’s wisdom.

Forgiveness creates freedom from the burden of carrying debilitating hurt and anger for the rest of our days. From a self-interested perspective, forgiveness is good for health. There is an illusion of strength in holding onto anger and the right to judge; paradoxically, holding on keeps people trapped, making their pain and injury the focus. Research shows forgiveness helps people heal physically, emotionally, and mentally, compared to holding on to hostility and resentment (Luskin, 2002, 77-93). Forgiveness is not only an act of humility and obedience; it also helps free people from the emotional exhaustion of dwelling on their pain.

In Laura Hillenbrand’s *Unbroken*, her 2010 bestselling biography of Louis Zamperini, an American World War II flier who became a POW (Prisoner of War) tortured by a Japanese

officer nicknamed “Bird,” she clearly describes the pain of unforgiveness:

“The paradox of vengefulness is that it makes men dependent upon those who have harmed them, believing that their release from pain will come only when they make their tormentors suffer. In seeking the Bird’s death to free himself, Louie had chained himself, once again, to his tyrant” (Hillenbrand 2010, 366-367).

Karen Carr discovered a similar insight that helped set her free from pain after being evacuated from the Ivory Coast. She wrote:

“Most significant was Job 19:25, ‘But as for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, and he will stand upon the earth at last.’ It helped me to consider that the many injustices might not be redeemed in my lifetime, but they would indeed be redeemed” (Story 1).

Forgiveness provides freedom from anger and resentment that chain the unforgiving to their pain.

Process of Forgiveness

Forgiveness is not about ignoring or minimizing pain by forgetting it, nor excusing the one who caused it. Excusing is for lesser pains, accidents, or slights. Excusing and forgetting are for insignificant, unintentional hurts that probably will not happen again. Lewis Smedes (Smedes, 1984, 61-66) described excusing as a social lubricant that allows people to move more easily through minor hurts, such as someone accidentally stepping on your foot or forgetting your name. However, severe, extraordinary, or repetitive hurts cannot be dealt with in this manner. Excusing those would disregard their significance and the threat they pose to safety. This type of greater hurt needs to be dealt with appropriately or it will continue, which means acknowledging the hurt and holding the one who caused it responsible.

Deep hurts damage trusting relationships. That damage needs to be acknowledged for true healing to occur. The hurt cannot be excused or avoided. Forgiveness cannot begin until the hurt and the broken relationship are clearly recognized. That relationship cannot go back to what it was without forgiveness and reconciliation.

The full extent of the damage needs to be acknowledged. The loss and hurt must be *felt*, a fearful and difficult process. At times seemingly insurmountable pain might be overwhelming. Admission of hurt also risks self-condemnation for failing to keep ourselves safe or to protect something or someone important to us. By understanding and accepting loss, we acknowledge the risk of being deeply hurt again, which is necessary for taking protective steps in the future. One example of this occurs in an abusive relationship. The abuse must be acknowledged and appropriate steps taken in order for the cycle of violence to be broken.

Acknowledging pain and vulnerability is the first step to forgiveness and healing. Accepting our own humanity can free us from self-condemnation for allowing the injury to occur. It also helps to accept the humanity of others. The “monsters” responsible for the pain are also humans subject to weakness and sinfulness. Acknowledging and accepting others’ humanness does not free them from responsibility for their choices. However, accepting our and their humanity is another step toward letting anger go and beginning to heal.

Dan and Connie Crum found some humor in a friend’s insight that helped free them from their pain after being assaulted, having their lives threatened, their children frightened, and losing

their home. Dan Crum wrote:

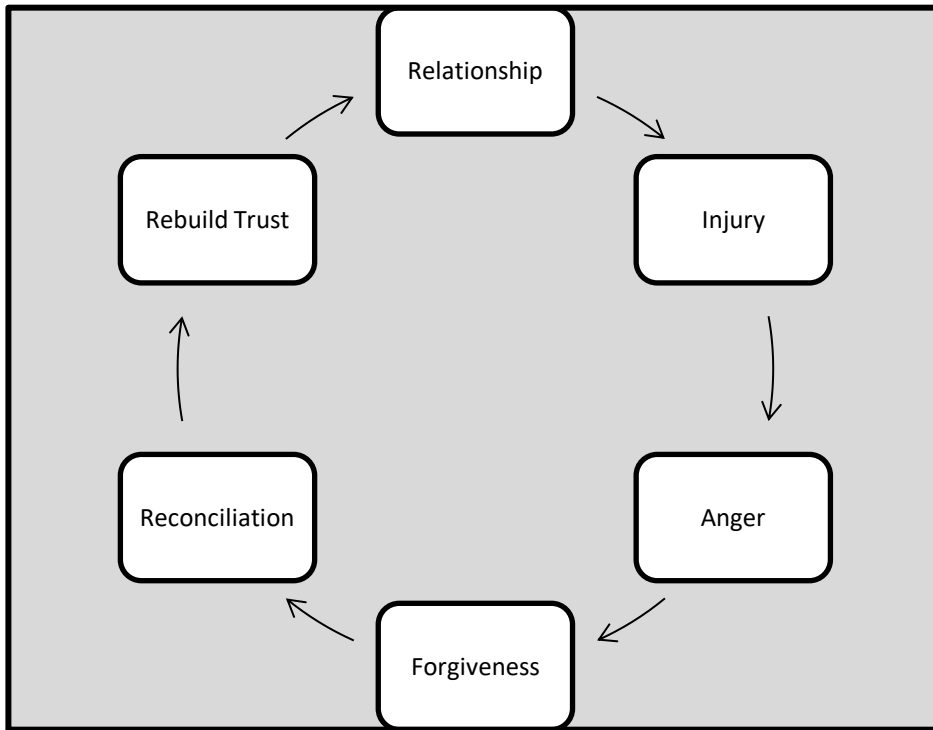
“A friend at church told me, ‘The problem with thieves is that they are always out of money and on the run.’ I laughed. Somehow, that helped me realize I could move on, free from seeking justice in order to quell my anger, because the thieves were still trapped in their own evil schemes. That was a form of justice to me and I felt free to stop focusing on them and get on with my life. What a release!” (Story 5)

Although anger often results from hurt, holding judgment over others does not keep anyone safe. What may feel like strength or safety actually chains people to their pain. Dwelling on judging hurtful people inhibits the restoration of relationships. Security does not come by holding onto the right for justice or vengeance. Forgiveness means choosing to give up that right, even though someone else is still held responsible. The right to justice is laid down, entrusting it into God's hands (Rom 12:19), and heartfelt freedom is picked up.

Acknowledging hurts and broken relationships increases the probability of change in the relationship. The relationship will not be restored to exactly what it was before. God commanded forgiveness even if the perpetrators have not taken responsibility for the pain they caused. Forgiving is not the same as forgetting. Even after forgiveness, intentional changes might still need to be made for future security: locks on doors, guards on hearts, preparation for future disasters. Even though the Crums had forgiven, they still needed to end their relationship with a neighbor who had betrayed them.

Forgiveness is a process that takes time. Anger might reoccur when painful moments are remembered. New experiences can reawaken forgiven hurts, such that they must be let go once again. Forgiveness is a journey with many twists and turns in simultaneous relationships: with others, ourselves, and God.

Essential Elements of the Forgiveness Process



Forgiving Ourselves and Accepting Forgiveness

Sometimes we see ourselves as causing pain, loss, or tragedy. We might hold ourselves responsible for wrongdoing or for not handling something well. We might also blame ourselves because we have impossibly high standards. We blame because knowing the cause decreases our sense of vulnerability. Self-blame increases the feeling of security because it implies that our own improved performance can keep the tragedy from striking again. It seems to put control in our hands, but also puts us under pressure.

Forgiving ourselves and accepting forgiveness are steps toward healing. This must be done with honesty in order to last. We must be fair in assessing our responsibility. Assistance from a trusted friend can help us be reasonable about the amount of responsibility we hold. If it is unreasonable to hold ourselves responsible, then healing proceeds by letting go of blame and lamenting the pain. When we *are* responsible in some way, then forgiving ourselves or receiving forgiveness begins the healing process. If we have caused pain, we must seek and accept forgiveness from the injured person or from God. If we cannot speak with that person or experience God's closeness, a trusted friend can hear our repentance and help us hear God's message of forgiveness (1 Jn 1:9). Accepting responsibility, expressing pain, letting go of self-destructive condemnation, repenting, accepting forgiveness and learning from experience can help us move freely into the future.

Forgiving God

Christians who believe in God's omniscience and omnipotence may blame him for pain or a lack of protection. The idea of "forgiving God" may not be comfortable for Christians who know God is without sin and cannot make mistakes. However, they tend to withdraw from God when

they feel hurt, neglected, or abandoned by him. It is possible to be very angry at God, afraid of his interventions, and want to hide from his presence.

Forgiveness is about healing broken relationships, which often benefits the forgiver more than the one forgiven. Forgiving others involves coming to accept human limitations and letting go of the desire to hurt them back and claim justice. “Forgiving God” involves the attempt to better know God’s true nature and let go of anger or blame, realizing that God loves faithfully and without fault, even if it is hard to understand. Some Christians describe this process as “surrendering” to God’s love, rather than maintaining defensive barriers of anger, resentment and distance. Others might experience “forgiving God” as gaining a greater concept of God’s faithfulness, and accepting that God’s reasons cannot always be known.

Reconciliation and Restoration

A broken relationship can be restored and healed through the process of reconciliation, which is a step beyond forgiveness. Reconciliation occurs when both parties are ready to speak with each other in order to express their hurt, understand the other’s experience and concerns, and take responsibility for pain. After both parties feel understood and have expressed regret, the hurt usually lessens. Based on this, both parties accept and express the responsibility they will take for protecting each other’s safety in the future. In this way a relationship can return to how it was before injury. Such a restoration process takes time. After reconciling, trust must be rebuilt through repeated positive experiences before a relationship will again feel safe.

CAREGIVER QUESTIONS TO SUPPORT THE FORGIVENESS PROCESS

- How were you hurt? What did you lose? (Listen and understand the various hurts that occurred.)
- What or who was responsible for the pain? With whom are you angry? Are you angry at someone, yourself, or God?
- How is your anger affecting you?
- What would it be like for you to let go of judging that person? Would you feel vulnerable in some way?
- How can you let go of your anger and condemnation and still keep yourself secure?
- What do you need to feel more secure?
- How can I join you, walk through this pain, and help you be safe?

G. Shame and Grace

There are two ways people manage blame when they feel responsible for something awful that happened. They can attribute blame to wrongful actions. They can also attribute it to a failure of character. When people focus on their actions, they feel guilty and will need forgiveness to find

relief. When they focus on a failure in their character or capabilities, they feel shame and will need grace to heal. Shame and guilt are not mutually exclusive; people may feel one or both at the same time.

Shame is an appropriate emotion when our sinful nature is considered. It can indicate a sinful area in our lives where God wants to offer redemption. However, shame can be achingly painful and debilitating when it grows unchecked in our hearts (2 Cor 7:10). Overwhelming shame leads to self-condemnation, and spiritual and emotional death. A shame-filled person might despairingly think over and over, “If only I wasn’t so stupid, that wouldn’t have happened.” Or, someone else might shame us by screaming, “You are so blind and so lazy that you brought this on us ... you are the worst partner I ever had!”

The pain and humiliation of failure, coupled with distress following trauma, can be so intense it becomes obvious to others. Visible emotions can lead to even more embarrassment. Shame is felt because it isn’t easy to “just get over” the experience. We may believe we are weak or unspiritual if we can’t just “give it to God” and “trust him.”

Shame is powerful and debilitating because it attacks our personal sense of worth. Feeling unworthy can cause us to turn down the love and support of God and others. When feeling ashamed, a natural tendency is to pull back and hide, even from God. Adam and Eve hid from God because they were ashamed of their nakedness. Their nakedness was nothing new to God, who created them that way. God knew them in their nakedness even before their sin, just as he knows the failings in our characters and still pursues us. Their nakedness was not a flaw; it was part of his design. God knows the failings of our humanity even better than our family, friends and colleagues and he still loves us.

Healing Shame

Adam and Eve were guilty because they acted disobediently and God imposed consequences. At the same time, God was compassionate with the shame they felt about their nakedness and gave them garments to cover themselves. Knowing our failures and sinfulness, God covers us, too. He loves and values us enough, just as we are, to die for us (Rom 3:23–24; 5:6–8). God promises to continue to transform and perfect us, until “the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil 1:6, ESV). He knows we are never going to be perfect on this side of heaven, and yet he will continue to love us and keep on working in our lives, covering our nakedness.

God loves and values us even while we fail. This is the grace that heals shame, as forgiveness heals guilt. God’s grace is the spiritual resource for times when we know our failures brought tragedy. Grace is also what we need when others bury us under criticism. A natural desire to hide makes it difficult to experience God’s grace, just as when Adam and Eve crouched down in the garden. In contrast, opening up to the experience of a closer relationship with God and others who love gracefully is most healing.

God’s command is to love others as he has loved us (1 Jn 3–4). We are to love others even when their failings are visible (Col 3:12–17). God has provided for shame by enabling and commanding Christian communities to be grace-filled. Grace differs from forgiving someone for actions. A grace-filled caregiver humbly comes alongside a person who feels shame and offers acceptance, compassion, and love, while acknowledging the struggle with brokenness. A grace-filled community provides healing and a tangible experience of caring and dignity. Rather than shame’s weakening effect from hiding, resilience is strengthened through grace-filled relationships. To receive the fruits of grace, we must not hide, but instead reach out to God and a grace-filled Christian community.

Healing is not complete until grace penetrates our souls deeply enough that we can fully accept it, often the most difficult aspect of healing shame. Knowing about God's grace and recognizing grace-filled acts from others might not touch the core without acceptance. If we focus only on what we don't deserve, grace from God and others is a confusing, shallow experience. Grace can be played down, or ignored. Some dismiss grace because they believe others don't know how bad they truly are, blocking the healing power of loving acceptance. Shame buries people and traps them. Recognizing our humanity with all its failings and brokenness, we must become willing to open our hearts to the love and value God and others give us. We do not deserve it. That is the point of grace! God and grace-filled people, whom he has transformed, give it freely (Eph 2:8-9). It is so difficult to accept grace because it is vulnerable and humbling to acknowledge the need to accept what is not deserved. Yet, God provided grace as the spiritual resource to heal shame, including the shame that trauma can bring.

3. GROWTH IN THE MIDST OF STRUGGLE

Researchers have observed that posttraumatic struggle can result in either growth or disintegration of persons, relationships, and faith. Generally, the stronger the impact, the greater the change, either as growth or disintegration (Fontana and Rosenheck, 2004). If people are resilient, well prepared, and supported after the incident, they will usually grow.

Like it or not, growth after trauma begins in the struggle immediately after impact. The time of greatest vulnerability and confusion also has the greatest growth potential. This truth was known even in the days of the Old Testament. The psalmist observed: "Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage. As they pass through the valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs" (Ps 84:4-5, NIV). The "valley of Baca" is a place of misery, weeping, tears, and drought. The psalmist observes that those who trust and seek God (intrinsic religiosity) will find life-giving newness as they walk through misery. Though miseries will always remain miserable, pursuing God and his purposes during misery will result in newness and vitality.

Many Christian songs witness to spiritual change born out of struggle. Stories behind some of the deepest, most precious Christian hymns reveal that they were written in times of hardship. Horatio Spafford, author of "When Peace Like a River" (*Chorus*: "It is well with my soul"), lost his four daughters in a shipwreck. When his ship passed by the place they drowned, Spafford received comfort from God that allowed him to write, "When sorrows like sea billows roll ... it is well with my soul." He wrote about peace beyond understanding, renewed focus on God, stronger assurance in faith, and increased awareness of the larger purpose revealed in the history of God with humankind (Osbeck, 1990, 25).

"When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
when sorrows like sea billows roll-
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
It is well; it is well with my soul.

Tho Satan should buffet, tho trials should come,
let this blest assurance control,
That Christ has regarded my helpless estate
and shed His own blood for my soul.

And, Lord haste the day when my faith shall be sight,
the clouds be rolled back as a scroll:

The trump shall resound and the Lord shall descend, “Even so”-it is well with my soul.

Chorus: It is well with my soul, it is well, it is well with my soul.”

Horatio Spafford, 1873

William Cowper (1731–1800) faced many emotional struggles that became a gateway of “mercy and blessings.” In the hymn “God Moves in a Mysterious Way His Wonders to Perform” he wrote:

“You fearful saints, fresh courage take: The clouds you so much dread are big with mercy, and shall break with blessings on your head” (Osbeck, 1990, 202).

The unknown 19th Century author of the hymn “How can I keep from singing” found a new song “above earth’s lamentations.” As she clung to her Savior, she gained a new glimpse of things that really matter, felt a firmer connection with God, a deepened peace, and new strength:

“No storm can shake my inmost calm, while to that refuge clinging; since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?... The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart, a fountain ever springing; all things are mine since I am his. How can I keep from singing?” (Wikipedia, last accessed 7/14/2012)

Secular researchers have recently taken a closer look at posttraumatic growth in the general population (Calhoun and Tedeschi, 2006). This has led to better understanding of positive change after trauma. Posttraumatic growth has been observed in the following areas: *Changes in self-perception, changes relating to others, changes in philosophy of life, and spiritual change.*

Often people describe increased personal strength, feeling “more vulnerable, yet stronger.” Many see new possibilities in life. Examples are: a woman who started an oncology nursing career after her child died from cancer; Dan and Connie Crum (Story 5) pursued training to counsel and support missionaries after they had been robbed overseas; and Ann (Story 3) trained as a psychologist and trauma expert after living through a motor vehicle accident that claimed the life of her husband and injured her children and herself. Many describe deeper, closer connections with others. Some independent individuals have opened up to depend on others at the time of vulnerability. Having been in pain, many develop deeper compassion, particularly for those in similar circumstances. Others feel greater freedom to be themselves, and gain courage to be more authentic in relationships. The third area of observed change is a revised philosophy of life. This frequently means increased appreciation for life, closer relationships, and changes in perspective in the existential, spiritual, and religious realm.

Jerry Sittser wrote about his own journey in *A Grace Disguised* (Sittser, 2004). He honestly and artfully describes changes in his own life that resonate with those researchers describe. Jerry provides depth to understanding spiritual change. He describes “*enlargement of the soul*” as he “absorbed the loss into his life, like soil receives decaying matter.” His metaphor of decay hints at a new soul-fertility in the midst of death and destruction. The enlarged soul has a *deeper capacity to feel*: “The soul is elastic, like a balloon. It can grow larger through suffering. Loss can enlarge its capacity for anger, depression, despair, and anguish, all natural and legitimate emotions whenever we experience loss. Once enlarged, the soul is also capable of experiencing greater joy, strength, peace, and love.” Sittser also observes that sorrow leads to fewer pretenses,

greater authenticity, and clearer priorities: “Deep sorrow often has the effect of stripping life of the pretense, vanity, and waste. It forces us to ask basic questions about what is most important in life. Suffering can lead to a simpler life, less cluttered with nonessentials. It is wonderfully clarifying.” Intense suffering “strips us of the props we rely on for our well-being. It knocks us off our feet and puts us on our backs. In the experience of loss, we come to the end of ourselves. But in coming to the end of ourselves, we can also come to the beginning of a vital relationship with God.”

Giving up false dependence on our own strength, we experience *new spiritual vitality* by rooting our lives more solidly in God. As we encounter the one true God and know him better, we are transformed. “To our shock and bewilderment, we discover that there is a Being in the universe who, despite our brokenness and sin, loves us fiercely. In coming to the end of ourselves, we have come to the beginning of our true and deepest selves. We have found the One whose love gives shape to our being.” To his surprise Jerry Sittser found *grace* in the midst of tragedy: “The tragedy pushed me toward God, even when I did not want him. And in God I found grace, even when I was not looking for it.” This grace leads to *peace, contentment and a new centeredness*. His faith took stronger roots in God and his grace: “God has become a living reality to me as never before. My confidence in God is somehow quieter but stronger. I feel little pressure to impress God or prove myself to him; yet I want to serve him with all my heart and strength. My life is full of bounty, even as I continue to feel the pain of loss. Grace is transforming me, and it is wonderful.”

A gain after trauma for intrinsically motivated Christ-followers is an even more intrinsically motivated faith, strongly focused on God and his grace. In the worst of times, God draws Christians to himself as they hold onto him and his people with all their feeble might. Here and there in the midst of mud and mire, there is a glimpse of redemption, a hue of the glory to come.

FEATURES OF POSTTRAUMATIC GROWTH

Self – perception

More vulnerable, yet stronger; deeper capacity to feel
New meaningful possibilities in life

Relating to Others

Deeper connections, increased capability for interdependence
Greater authenticity, less pretense
Increased compassion

Philosophy of Life

Greater appreciation of life
Greater importance of relationships

Spiritual Change

New appreciation of grace
Stronger connection to God
Stronger spiritual vitality and intrinsic religious motivation
Deeper sense of peace and contentment
Stronger awareness of things that ultimately matter

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

When trauma strikes, people are affected physically, psychologically, and spiritually. Christians in ministry will encounter significant spiritual challenges along with posttraumatic stress. Their response to these spiritual challenges will affect their ability to bounce back from the impact. A deeper understanding of the spiritual impact of trauma helps to better prepare for crises, and to identify resources for the inevitable spiritual struggle after trauma. Those who are well prepared and sufficiently supported will be more resilient. Despite loss, posttraumatic stress, and struggle, the prepared will grow and deepen in faith.

SPIRITUAL PREPARATION AND TRAUMA SUPPORT

Key elements for spiritual preparation are:

- ❖ A sound theology of suffering,
- ❖ Strengthening intrinsic religiosity,
- ❖ Knowing and extending forgiveness,
- ❖ Ability to face and share uncomfortable emotions,
- ❖ Ability to build close relationships, and
- ❖ Ability to accept weakness and failure.

Essential resources for spiritual support after trauma are:

- ❖ Knowing God's presence through the presence of other believers, intercession, practical support, and/or rituals,
- ❖ Lamenting sorrow, pain, disappointment, and anger before God,
- ❖ Forgiveness, and
- ❖ Grace.

Churches, mission organizations, and other Christian communities would do well to include these elements of spiritual preparation into their teaching and training. They should also build a general culture of mutual support for times of crisis, which can be complemented with structures specific to the individual and a particular crisis. Supporters and support teams will benefit from being familiar with the essential resources for spiritual support.

Sometimes the consequences of trauma will continue to hurt for the rest of someone's life. People can allow this to draw them closer to God and to the resources in their faith. Christians understand that God's ultimate purpose is the restoration of human brokenness into a freely loving relationship with him as Creator and Redeemer. What ultimately matters most is what draws humans to love God from all of their heart, soul, and mind, and their neighbors as themselves (Mt 22:34-40). In this self-centeredness is overcome. Spiritual struggle in suffering has its place in fostering such love. No one in their right mind, not even the God-man Jesus, would want to suffer unless it was for a really good reason. Suffering makes sense only as part of a fallen world in an all-encompassing process of restoration and redemption. Not that a sufferer is more in need of redemption than anyone else, but sufferers can choose to embrace spiritual growth in the midst of trouble. This choice mysteriously imparts a greater capacity for mercy, grace, and redemptive wonders.