

Chapter Preview

finding
GOD

in the

GRAY

THE
LONELY PATH
OF PAIN



Chapter Nine

My Personal Journey with Pain

By Frank Friedmann

Two years ago, my bride Janet returned from a craft show. She was quite proud of herself, announcing that she had bought me a gift. When I asked her what it was, she told me it was a plaque. I thought to myself, “Sweetheart! After all these years together, don’t you know that I don’t like trite Christian platitudes?” Although I did not verbalize my thoughts, she must have seen my face. She instantly said, “Wait! You’ve got to hear the story.” So, I told her I was all ears.

She told me that when she entered this one lady’s booth, she saw this plaque and it almost took her breath away. She inquired if the lady had made the plaque, and she confirmed that she had. Janet asked if it was mass-produced from a mold, and the lady informed her that as far as she knew it was unique to her. My bride was hooked. She asked the lady to tell her the story of how the plaque had come into being. The lady told Janet she was sitting at her table, working on her clay, when a thought came to her mind. In her mind she said, “Well that is a nice thought!” and quickly wrote it down. As she pondered the words, she decided to put them on a plaque.

Janet informed the artist that she had made that plaque for me, and in those few words she had captured my life story. The lady quickly responded, “Oh, so you know what it means?” Surprised, Janet in turn questioned her, “Aren’t you a Christian?” “No,” the lady responded. “I don’t believe in God. Can you tell me what it means?” At that point, Janet shared with her the truth of what I have been trying to share with you in this book. Then she bought the plaque and with great anticipation was now ready to give it to me. She pulled out the plaque with tears in her eyes, and as I read it, my own eyes filled with tears.

The plaque said, “Grace sat down with me until I could walk again.” That is indeed my life story.

My friend, I have not written this book in a vacuum. The teachings offered here were not formed in my study but were worked out in the lab of a fallen world. Because of man’s rebellion in the garden of Eden, the world was placed under a curse, and all men are now born separated from God. **We live in a world we were not designed for and experience things we were never equipped to experience.** This has resulted in the experience of death in our lives every day. Death, being defined not just as a physical experience, but relational and emotional death that comes from illness, loss,

deception, betrayal, and rejection. These very painful wounds come to us not only from our neighbors and coworkers but even from those we love and who sincerely claim to love us.

As stated earlier, it is a universal law that we can only give to someone else what we ourselves possess. Put simply, we not only experience death individually - we express death relationally. I know this to be true because I have lived in both of those spectrums. The outline of this book follows the progression of my own journey with and through my pain that came from a multitude of death ministers.

Over the course of my life, very hurtful things were said and done to me that God never intended for me to experience, things that devastated my soul. I was not designed for such wounding, and neither were you. My days were darkened, my nights were restless, my joy was crushed. My hopes and dreams were shattered, and my innocence was stolen. I also had to live with the fact that I had shattered others' joys and dreams, crushed their joy, and robbed them of their innocence. Life for me, the very getting up to face a new day, was reduced to drudgery. The overwhelming pain oppressed me continually and perpetually, and I could find no way out of the valley of death I was living in, even though I tried so hard to do so.

I tried to hide from my painful memories, but no matter where I hid, they found me. It may sound ridiculous to you but as I shared earlier, I would replay those devastating scenes in my mind and attempt to rewrite the script as it had occurred, so that those things never really happened. This attempt at fiction was powerless. The facts could not be altered. The pain would remain.

Since I could not change what had happened, I tried to change what was happening. I buried myself in busyness, putting my hands and my mind to everything I could lay hold of in an effort to clutter my life and somehow quiet my raging emotions. I worked. I recreated. I distracted myself anyway I could, but it was all in vain. I could not hide from the knife that had on far too numerous occasions pierced my heart. The glory of what Psalm 139 teaches, took on a very grievous interpretation for me.

There we are told that the Holy Spirit will always find us wherever we go. If we ascend into the heavens, the Spirit will meet us there. If we descend to the depths of Sheol, the Spirit is there. In this context, the writer of this Psalm cries out in exuberance, "Where can I flee from Your Spirit?" The psalmist derives great comfort from knowing the God Who reveals Himself as our Comforter will always be with him wherever he goes.

In a profound perversion of that incredible promise, pain had somehow replaced the Holy Spirit as the subject of Psalm 139, at least it felt that way in my life. It seemed that if I ascended to the heavens pain would be there to meet me. If I descended into the depths of the sea, the tentacles of grief were there to squeeze the life out of me. At the thought of my seemingly omnipresent pain, my cry was not one of exuberance, but desperation. Is there anywhere I can flee from this pain?

In my inability to escape pain's tenacious pursuit of me, my desperation intensified. I had to find a way out of this perpetual, punishing pain. I searched for verses in God's word, memorized them, recited them over and over, but could not find one that brought light into the depths of my darkness. On the recommendation of trusted friends, I bought a multiplicity of books to read, but could not find the truth that I needed.

I sought to numb the pain with alcohol, just enough to take the edge off but found the edge of the cliff I was on was too narrow and its edges too jagged to provide sure footing. I tried prescription medication, which turned out to be a roll of the dice. First one, then another, in a vain attempt to numb what could not be numbed.

I was told to set my mind and remember that God would never allow anything into my life beyond what I was able to bear. After all, I was told, the Holy Spirit is so trustworthy that He will never make a promise He would fail to fulfill. This left me in a quandary. The wild emotions I was experiencing remained just below the surface. Like a pressure cooker, they kept boiling intensely, continually calling my mind away from God. It was like the pain was a demanding child that had to have its way. It was like I had memories that refused to be forgotten. I would liken this part of my journey to a roller coaster that ascends and then descends, but the ascent was minimal and the descent was rapid and overwhelming.

Finally, I humbled myself. I said no to the carefully built public façade I had established, that all was well with Frank Friedman. I acknowledged to myself that my public persona was a lie. I had told it often and tried to believe it. Perhaps if I said it often enough, maybe I would not only be able to fool others but convince myself the facade was true.

Reality, however, is overwhelmingly powerful. It cannot be overcome with fantasy, no matter how carefully we script the illusion of our own making.

I really don't know how to describe those days. Maybe I was taking a few steps forward only to take multiple steps backward. Maybe it was like walking in a circle. Perhaps the best description would be that I was walking in a maze, trying door after door that seemed open, but never really provided a way out.

I have always fancied myself a warrior, quick to answer the call to fight for myself. But when it came to the painful circumstances of life, I found that I did not have the resources to even stand, let alone fight. **Pain has a way of emptying people and leaving them helpless, and helplessness is a devastating foe.**

As life painfully dredged on, I finally came to the conclusion that I needed resources beyond what I possessed. I humbled myself and sought counseling. Since I had learned to not trust people, I went guardedly, sharing only bits and pieces of the events of my life. I was convinced in my mind, that if I ever bared it all, no one would really understand. I feared that the looks on their faces would confirm the sense I had of being alone. There was also the fear I might be rejected! In my mind, I reasoned that if they came to know who I really was, their reaction would confirm the shame I was feeling. I have come to believe these feelings are epidemic among humanity. I can hear their cry, can you?

Is there anyone out there who will care for me?
Anyone out there who can understand where I am,
and love me enough to fight for me because I can no
longer fight for myself?

When silence is all that is heard in response to that cry, there are so many people who would echo the woeful words of the Apostle Paul that they are despairing of life (II Corinthians 1:8). That is where I found myself in 1992. I was despairing of life! Fortunately, I found someone who not only heard my words but stepped into my wounds as a friend that sticks closer than a brother. He spoke magic words to me.

As I grew over time to trust him, I shared my story with him. I started on the surface with the lesser pains of my life, but as he affirmed his love and acceptance of me, I gradually moved to the deeper pains, the ones that I had hidden for so many years. The compassion in his eyes flooded my heart, and his words were a healing balm to my soul. He told me that shameful things had been done to me, and I had done shameful things to myself and others, but in Christ, I had been made new. And then he voiced those magic words, "Frank, you are not a shameful person." In his gentle way,

He affirmed to me that Jesus loved and accepted me just as I am, with all my wounds, scars, failures, and fears.

As he taught me Who God really is and what God wanted to be to me, I made the decision to finally stop running from my pain. I made the radical choice to embrace my pain, sit down in it and stay there until I found God.

And there, sitting down in my pain, He sat down with me. I found Him in a way I never knew Him before,
just like Job did!

He did not wave a magic wand. He did not take away my pain. Instead, He gave me Himself to supply whatever I needed to walk through my pain. He added to my pain, the experience of an intimate relationship with Him. He provided me with a deep and abiding joy that nothing and no one can take away from me. I have a peace that cannot be explained, let alone comprehended. I am experiencing His love and continue to receive more and more of His love every day. I say that only because His love is infinite, and none of us will ever be able to exhaust His love, not even in eternity.

Over time, I have been healed of so much of my pain. **When the painful memories of those hurtful circumstances find their way to the forefront of my mind, I can face them without them breaking me like they used to do. I am no longer a victim of their oppression.** Some of my pain continues with me in my faith journey.

Occasionally they rise up and sting me powerfully, as intensely as when those horrible events first happened. They remind me that they are still here and ready to cripple me. They will do so if I do not stand against them with God as my strength. I no longer walk in fear of those memories. His perfect love has cast out the fear of having to face those wounds alone.

I have learned to not fight against those pains, but instead, use them as a prompt to look to God in faith, and find Him as my sufficiency. When those painful memories ambush me and knock me down, He sits down with me. He stays there with me, for as long as it takes for me to stand up again.

When I am ready to stand, He lifts me up and stands
with me.

And then, as I walk again, He walks with me, supplying me with all I need to journey through this fallen world. I have found that I truly can do all things, as He

strengthens and encourages me with His presence in my life (Philippians 4:13). Like Job, and so many others, I did not find a way out of my pain, but I found Him in my pain, and He is more than enough. I am not alone in this profound experience of God.

My friend Bobby Price and his bride Teri have followed this same path into the sufficiency of His glorious presence. Not long ago they lost their precious son to colon cancer. I cannot imagine the pain of having to say goodbye to a child in such a way. After many months, I called Bobby to ask how he was doing. He told me that they were finally beginning to take their first steps out of the valley of death. When I asked him how they were able to do that, he told me that they realized they had to stop fighting against what they could not change. They had to sit down in their pain until God met them where they were. I was stunned! Bobby and his bride had found the same path through pain that I had found. Sitting down in their pain, they found that God sat down with them until they could walk again.

A short time after that conversation, I talked to my neighbors Joe and Wendy whose son has a severe case of autism. They are great parents and have cared for him and their other children in a wonderful way. They came to the sober realization that as they grew older, they would lose the ability to care for him. When the opportunity came for them to secure his future in a wonderful care center, they made the best decision for him and placed him in that home.

Their mama and papa hearts were deeply bruised and bleeding. When I asked Wendy how they were doing, she said they were slowly beginning to move forward from the hurtful place they found themselves in. When I asked her how they were doing that, she said they came to the realization that they had to just sit down in their pain until God met them there. Again, I was stunned. There was no way out of the pain for Joe and Wendy, but in finding God, they found the strength to stand and begin to walk again in their loss.

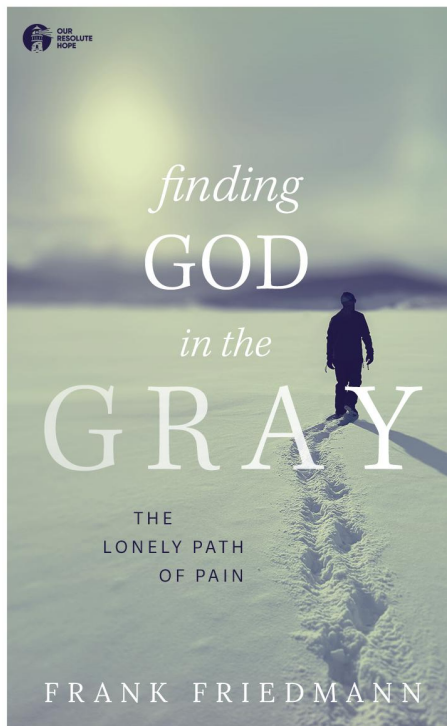
Just a few weeks later, I was on the phone with my friend Nico. He is also no stranger to pain. He has had to journey for many years with the loss of his brother, who was murdered in the driveway of the family home. As we shared together about our journeys with pain, I reminded Nico of what I have shared with him on many occasions. I told him, "Nico, there is no manual for that kind of pain." The words that sprang from his mouth stunned me once again. "No papa," he said, "there is no manual. There is only Immanuel (God with us). Immanuel is the manual!"

Though each of our journeys has been so very different, these dear friends and I have all come to the same conclusion. **Though there was no way out of the pain that had come into our lives, there was God. Each of us found that He offered no answer,**

but Himself. He met us where we were and sat down with us until we could walk again. As He made Himself so very real to us, we knew that though life would be forever different, because of Him, life could be good again.

In the next chapter, I want to introduce you to the very best friend that any of us could possibly have. I want to share with you the life and ministry of Jesus, Who is our Immanuel. He is the One Who gets us! He understands the pain and loss that we are experiencing. He will be all that He is, to all that we need, as we trust Him – the goodness of His character, and the power of His presence.

You are loved!
Pastor Frank



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