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Acts 7:59-8:1, NLT.

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Chapter 8

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Trauma and the Stoning of Stephen.

Some years ago, in the winter, I was driving Wendy’s Volvo into Boulder, south on 36. The road was icy and I was going slowly, maybe forty miles an hour, with cars whipping by me at up to seventy miles an hour. I’m from L.A. and the idea of driving on slick roads has never felt natural to me. I always have this impulse to slow down to three miles an hour. But I was trying to compromise between driving at a safe speed and not becoming an obstacle myself. Just as I got to a popular overlook spot, where people pull over to see the City of Boulder and the Front Range foothills unfold before them, I saw two badly wrecked cars on the shoulder, and behind them, a police car with its red and blue lights flashing. I was in the slow lane and the fast lane to my left had traffic in it. I couldn’t change lanes, and I knew that I was going to come close to the cars on the side of the road, so I braked – but too hard. My car slid sideways, with the rear wheel-drive

Volvo doing a complete 180. Just past the accident site, my car came to a rest in the slow lane, pointed the wrong way.

While I was sitting there, wondering what the safest way to turn my car around might be, with traffic coming at me in the fast lane, there was a knock on my window. It was the officer who had been working the crash scene; he had jogged up to my car. I lowered my window – and he proceeded to yell at me. I don't remember his exact words, but he was angry, and he shouted something like: "What the hell do you think you're doing!" He added an expletive. I will never forget the intense fire in his eyes as he continued yelling at me.

There are a number of situations in the Bible, and in fact it is a very common situation, where a biblical character undergoes tremendous emotional trauma. We'll begin with the stoning of Stephen in the Book of Acts. Stephen is chosen by the Apostles as one of a group of seven, and today, they are often considered the first church deacons, to oversee the daily distribution of food to poor widows. We are told this about Stephen:

⁸Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed amazing miracles and signs among the people.

Stephen gives a compelling speech to the Jewish council, the Sanhedrin, after he is accused of blasphemy against God, the Law, and the Temple. He talks about

the history of Israel, illustrating the fact that Israel has a long history of rejecting the messengers sent by God, from Abraham to Jesus Christ – who was executed.

This is their response when he begs them to answer the call of the Holy Spirit:

⁵⁴ The Jewish leaders were infuriated by Stephen's accusation, and they shook their fists at him in rage. ⁵⁵ But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed steadily into heaven and saw the glory of God, and he saw Jesus standing in the place of honor at God's right hand. ⁵⁶ And he told them, "Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing in the place of honor at God's right hand!"

⁵⁷ Then they put their hands over their ears and began shouting. They rushed at him ⁵⁸ and dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. His accusers took off their coats and laid them at the feet of a young man named Saul.

⁵⁹ As they stoned him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ He fell to his knees, shouting, "Lord, don't charge them with this sin!" And with that, he died.

Saul was one of the witnesses, and he agreed completely with the killing of Stephen.

Notice the last line. Saul approved of the killing of Stephen. This is of course Paul, before he meets Jesus on the road to Damascus. We think of him as a rock solid, unemotional evangelist who was flogged five times, beaten multiple times by angry mobs, imprisoned several times, stoned by a violent crowd, shipwrecked spending a full day and night adrift at sea, put on trial with his life at stake, and who lived for decades living in constant deprivation. Paul, who suffered an incredible series of physical and emotional traumas, started his career by piling on the guilt of agreeing to and watching the stoning of a completely innocent man who died for the same Savior for whom Paul eventually evangelized.

There are several passages where Paul speaks to the impact of what he went through, especially when he was a missionary. This is from 2 Corinthians:

⁸ We think you ought to know, dear brothers and sisters, about the trouble we went through in the province of Asia. We were crushed and overwhelmed beyond our ability to endure, and we thought we would never live through it. ⁹ In fact, we expected to die. But as a result, we stopped relying on ourselves and learned to rely only on God, who raises the dead. ¹⁰ And he did rescue us from mortal danger, and he will rescue us again. We have placed our confidence in him, and he will continue to rescue us.

Because the Bible is ancient, we forget that this is not fiction. Modern people read right through passages like this, but if someone wrote or said them today, words like these would strike us cold. Paul says that he and his companion, co-evangelist, and mentee Timothy, “*were crushed and overwhelmed beyond our ability to endure*”. This is how Paul and Timothy chose to deal with their trauma:

as a result, we stopped relying on ourselves and learned to rely only on God, who raises the dead. ¹⁰ And he did rescue us from mortal danger, and he will rescue us again. We have placed our confidence in him, and he will continue to rescue us.

Their response is to turn to God, to put their lives and their souls in God’s hands.

Paul knows that God will continue to protect them in the future.

Here is another passage from 2 Corinthians. Paul describes what happened when he and his unnamed traveling companions, which probably included Timothy, arrived in Macedonia to evangelize. Notice that he again describes how he was able to deal with the emotional impact of being hated and attacked:

⁵ When we arrived in Macedonia, there was no rest for us. We faced conflict from every direction, with battles on the outside and fear on the inside. ⁶ But God, who encourages those who are discouraged, encouraged us by the arrival of Titus. ⁷ His presence was a joy, but so was the news he brought of the encouragement he received from you. When he told us how much you long to see me, and how sorry you are for what happened, and how loyal you are to me, I was filled with joy!

Paul was first encouraged by God. He was then warmed by the arrival of Titus, a Gentile, a non-Jew who became a follower of Christ as a result of Paul's ministry, and who was a friend and a peacemaker, a man who was then known for healing the fractured church in Corinth. God often provides other people, ones with big and open hearts, to give us solace and relieve our anxiety. There are times when God blesses us with the opportunity to be that empathic person.

Paul is, of course, not the only biblical character to undergo tremendous trials. Job survived an unbelievable series of catastrophic events, including witnessing the slaughter of his servants and the deaths of all his children. David spent his early years as the leader of Israel dodging Saul, who was hunting him with intentions of killing David. He survived combat with the Philistines, the Moabites, the Ammonites, and Edomites. He fought King Hadadezer of the Aramean Kingdom, in modern Syria. His own son Absalom led a coup against King David, forcing him to flee Jerusalem. While this extensive warfare allowed David to unify and strengthen Israel, God concluded that David had committed so much

bloodshed that he was not morally qualified to build the First Temple, and so that task ended up in the hands of his son, King Solomon. We can only imagine the psychological state of King David by the time God turned his back on him.

The Hebrew Scriptures give us significant insight into how David dealt with his own physical and emotional trauma. He spent extended periods living with hypervigilance and having to constantly worry about the people around him, who was his friend, and who was his enemy. But he processed his psychological trauma through prayers, often written as poetry. This is what has led to the tradition of attributing emotional Psalms, specifically Psalms of Lament and Thanksgiving to David. Here is the entirety of the very short Psalm 13:

*¹ O LORD, how long will you forget me? Forever?
How long will you look the other way?*

*² How long must I struggle with anguish in my soul,
with sorrow in my heart every day?
How long will my enemy have the upper hand?*

*³ Turn and answer me, O LORD my God!
Restore the sparkle to my eyes, or I will die.*

*⁴ Don't let my enemies gloat, saying, "We have defeated him!"
Don't let them rejoice at my downfall.*

*⁵ But I trust in your unfailing love.
I will rejoice because you have rescued me.*

*⁶ I will sing to the LORD
because he is good to me.*

It starts out with David laying his heart open before God, asking how long he must live with anguish and sorrow. He asks God to restore the sparkle in his

eyes. If this doesn't happen, David is afraid that he will die. Then David throws himself at the feet of God, giving God his full trust. He knows that God's love will never fail him. He acknowledges that God has rescued him in the past, that God is good to him. In six quick verses, King David goes from desolation to determination, from being lost to finding himself. So far, I have been using the NLT. Here is the NKJV version of the last two verses of Psalm 13:

- ⁵ *But I have trusted in Your mercy;
My heart shall rejoice in Your salvation.*
⁶ *I will sing to the LORD,
Because He has dealt bountifully with me.*

I like this version, not because it is a better translation, but because the wording makes it poetically clear that David is using a common psychological tool to manage his fears and his PTSD. He reminds himself of times when God protected him, when he felt safe. *He has dealt bountifully with me.* David regulates his emotions and roots himself by reliving moments when he was secure.

Getting back to the 180 I did on an icy freeway: the officer seemed to me to be quite unreasonably upset. He shouted at me for coming too close to the accident scene, for driving too fast for the conditions, for not being able to control my blankety-blank car. I waited what seemed like forever – but was in truth probably no more than two minutes – for him to calm down, to ask me for my

driver's license and insurance. I wondered how many offenses I was going to be ticketed for, how many points I would rack up, what this would do to my insurance rates. But then the officer suddenly stopped yelling, was silent for a moment, looked away, and then looked back at me. This is, of course, as best as I can remember the situation. He then told me that he would pause traffic while I turned my car around. Then he apologized for "losing it", saying that there were two badly damaged bodies in one of the wrecked cars in front of his patrol car.

Here is part of another Psalm, number 31, attributed to David, although we do not know if he truly wrote it. This is from the NRSV. Listen carefully to how the author, whoever it is, overviews what he has gone through, the way he is treated now, how badly damaged he is, and how terrorized he feels as people scheme against him. He admits to being almost paranoid as a result of all that he has gone through at the hands of evil people. But like the author of Psalm 13, he acknowledges that God has proven himself to be dependable, and he associates God's protection with the simple fact that God does love him.

⁹ *Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress;
my eye wastes away from grief,
my soul and body also.*

¹⁰ *For my life is spent with sorrow,
and my years with sighing;
my strength fails because of my misery,
and my bones waste away.*

- ¹¹ *I am the scorn of all my adversaries,
a horror to my neighbors,
an object of dread to my acquaintances;
those who see me in the street flee from me.*
- ¹² *I have passed out of mind like one who is dead;
I have become like a broken vessel.*
- ¹³ *For I hear the whispering of many—
terror all around!—
as they scheme together against me,
as they plot to take my life.*
- ¹⁴ *But I trust in you, O LORD;
I say, "You are my God."*
- ¹⁵ *My times are in your hand;
deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.*
- ¹⁶ *Let your face shine upon your servant;
save me in your steadfast love.*

Today, of course, we have other ways of dealing with psychological trauma. We have mental health professionals who can provide expert care and guidance. Yes, relying on God, on prayer, and on the support of those who love us, and on anyone offering empathetic support is critical. But God also gave us minds that allow us to study and understand to some degree what it means for humans to undergo exposure to pain, fear, and anxiety. We should absolutely make use of professionals who are trained in these areas.

It was only many years after I did my 180, and I became a hospital chaplain, that I began to meet people who deal with terrible situations as part of their work. Emergency room personnel, ICU nurses, most other medical workers,

police officers and sheriff's deputies, paramedics and EMTs, mountain and water rescue teams, military personnel, victim advocacy workers, and social workers all go to work each day not knowing what horrible situations they might confront. I talked once to a couple who had adopted four children, largely in response to having fostered an adolescent who told them horrible stories about the abuse he had suffered at the hands of his biological parents. We all must offer grace to anyone who is managing the after-effects of witnessing human suffering.

I did tell the officer that I didn't blame him for being upset, that I could only imagine what he had witnessed. He thanked me and did not ticket me. After this event, I made sure that we always bought well made, aggressive all-weather tires.

Let me end with a quote from the Prophet Habakkuk. He laments the terrible destruction done by the invading Babylonian Empire:

¹⁷ *For the violence done to Lebanon will overwhelm you;
the destruction of the animals will terrify you—
because of human bloodshed and violence to the earth,
to cities and all who live in them.*

One reason I like this quote is that he acknowledges the suffering of animals at the hands of mankind. When he talks about "*the violence done to Lebanon*" he's talking about the large-scale logging of cedar forests in Lebanon by the Babylonians so that they could make weapons of war, like sieges and chariots. He reminds us that it's not just humans who suffer from human-caused trauma.