

## **PART 2: Discipled by Pain – One Man's Story**

Many words could be used to describe Wayne Hannah: devoted husband, loving father, pastor-shepherd, long-time staff member of Encompass World Partners\* to name just a few. But before all that he was – and still is – a sufferer. But he's not just a sufferer; he's a *model* sufferer, who has earned the respect of those who know him best. We admire him because, 1) although he suffers almost every day with Crohn's Disease, it is rare that those around him know when he is having a rough day, and 2) he refuses to be defined by Crohn's.

In Part 2 we have the rare privilege of sitting at the feet of someone who has been discipled by pain. Many thanks to Wayne for graciously accepting to pen some thoughts about this gift God has entrusted to him: the gift of suffering.

*\* Formerly Grace Brethren Foreign Missions (GBFM)*

### *The Nazareth Syndrome*

They found him in the synagogue, of course.

Imagine what it must have been like. He grew up in this city. Nazareth: population of about 500. They all knew him and his mom and dad. Growing up, he must have been well known and popular. Though his father was a carpenter, he himself was highly educated, a rabbi. He certainly amazed the scholars down in Jerusalem that time when he was not yet a teen. It was no surprise that this native son had become a leader of multitudes, popular beyond imagination...and a doer of miracles.

The scene that unfolded that day in the synagogue in Nazareth is one of the most amazing in the life of Jesus. He is welcomed home, lauded, and praised by everyone. Everyone. Not only in Nazareth but also throughout the northern area of the country. His reputation as a leader, sage, and a teacher of the Scriptures was already legend; word of the miracles he had performed had spread throughout the land.

There in the synagogue the young Rabbi opened the scroll he had selected. It was a Messianic passage from Isaiah, describing the promised Messiah. After completing the reading, Jesus returned the scroll to the attendant and sat down. Opening his mouth he said, "Today this prophecy is fulfilled in your midst."

Every eye upon him, his next words, expounding on the meaning of the Messianic passage would shake them to their core. They were a certain pronouncement of his messiahship! There, in the midst of the people who had known him all his life, he positioned himself as the culminating center of the universe (as the Jewish people knew it), as the Savior and consummation of all their hopes, beliefs, dreams, and promises from Jehovah God!

At first they marveled, but quickly their joy flipped to a ferocious anger that fueled the mob to the point of wanting to murder Jesus. Were it not for his miraculous escape out of their midst, they would have thrust Jesus off the Precipice Mount to an early death.

Here's a paraphrase of what Jesus said that caused them to fly into a rage. (See Luke 4:14-27.)

"I am telling you that I am the Messiah, verified by the miracles I have done throughout Capernaum. You have heard about them. What you expect now is for me to do those same miracles right here in my hometown. But I must remind you that prophets have to say what is true, what fits with the plan of God even when it is not accepted or popular with people. This is especially true when the prophet has to tell the truth of God to the very people who are closest to him. So, you who have loved me most might like what I have to say the least."

At this pivotal moment, Jesus was seen as a *threat* to their desires, not as the *Savior* they expected. The crowd by their actions showed that they had decided they didn't like this kind of Messiah. "Let's kill this one and wait for a better one who will do what we deserve and expect. This can't be what Jehovah God had in mind for us!"

### **I WOULD HAVE BEEN FIRST IN THE MIRACLE LINE**

What would you do if you had been there? If there had been a line forming of people who desperately needed a miracle, would you be in it? Me? I would have fiercely fought everyone to be first in the

miracle line! I would not only have wanted a healing miracle, but like Jesus' Jewish community, I would have believed that I deserved one.

What would I have asked Jesus to do for me? I would have asked him to give me more guts. No, not courage, but actual *intestines*. There's a long story – over 40 years long – explaining just why, but the short answer is wrapped up in two words: Crohn's Disease. My purpose here is not to talk about the personal pain and suffering that Crohn's has caused me, but to explain a few of the powerful lessons this suffering has taught me about God and the dramatic value of pain, suffering and crisis, in His loving plan for His children. What most people consider something to be rid of I have come to realize is something to embrace and even be thankful for.

## **MY STORY**

The year was 1972. A recent college graduate, I headed to France for a two-year short term missionary stint to work at the Chateau de St. Albain, a place of spiritual encounter and youth evangelism. Several months into my time there, I began to suffer quite regularly from harsh stomach pain. At first it was bearable, and I experimented with different dietary changes to see if that would help. After some weeks, the double-you-over pain became more intense and debilitating. Every seven or eight days the pain was accompanied by bouts of vomiting and high fever. I recall many occasions when my dear friends and co-workers and I would pray and cry out to God for relief and healing. I was always a small guy, weighing only about 125 pounds in those days. But, now I was slowly losing weight...120...115...110 pounds. Finally, Tom Julien, the France leader, and the staff gathered together to anoint me with oil and pray for God's healing. I intensely believed that God would heal me.

He didn't.

The next obvious step was hospitalization, and the doctors confirmed a diagnosis of ileitis, now called Crohn's Disease. There had been only a few recorded incidences of the disease in France, and they did not know what to do other than to recommend a diet of soft and bland foods. Sensing so strongly that my healing miracle was going to happen soon, I resisted the worsening pain and agonizing symptoms. It wasn't long before we all realized that the only option left was for me to return to the USA for treatment.

Within the hour after arriving home at the Dayton, Ohio, airport, our family doctor was examining me. The next day I was admitted at Ohio State University Medical Center in Columbus. My doctor there was a specialist, the head of the entire gastroenterology department, and the director of the first government-funded study of Crohn's Disease. I still prayed and begged God to be healed, of course. It was a huge encouragement to my soul, nonetheless, that God was showing his power, presence, and love to me through these events.

All options were pursued to avoid surgery; some things seemed to bode promise and some made me even sicker. It wasn't long before my condition became critical, and I weighed about 95 pounds. Without surgery, death was likely. On July 13, 1973, during a four-hour surgery, a portion of my small intestine was removed. The average adult has about 24 feet of small bowel, and as much as a fourth to a third was removed.

That's how it all began. I was twenty-four years old and full of optimism. So, I was imagining that after recovering from this surgery everything would be great with no more problems and no more disease.

That optimism was seasoned with a bit of ignorance. Even the expert gastroenterologists weren't sure how to treat it. Sure, the doctors told me that there was no cure but I believed that this was just a limit for the doctors. I had God on my side. This thing was a cinch for God to cure and I was confident that God not only could heal me, but that He had. He lined up the circumstances for me to find the best doctors and the best care, and the diseased areas had been cut out. God even arranged things so that the US government paid for all of my medical bills! So, I was sure that God had healed me.

But...He didn't.

Over four decades have passed at the time of this writing and I still have Crohn's disease. In fact, I wrote part of this article during my regular three-hour IV drug infusion near my home in Atlanta, Georgia. While there have been some protracted periods when the disease was in remission, it has taken its toll. It has been the source of agonizing physical suffering. I have had seven intestinal resections to date. The shortened intestine has caused other problems, such as kidney stones--more than 30 passed or removed. When the intestine is damaged or restricted, the body forms other passageways called fistulas. Six of my more recent surgeries have been due to fistula abscesses and repairs. Accompanying the physical, of course, have been periodic bouts with discouragement, doubt, embarrassment, and occasional anger. Frustration has sometimes come from the misunderstanding by others of the disease. Oh, the number of bizarre and insulting cures and causes that have been suggested to me over the years!

My last resection in September of 2012 was certainly the toughest and most dramatic. At that point, the doctors at the Cleveland Clinic were convinced that my small intestine could no longer absorb enough nutrients to support life just by eating and drinking. Their attempts, however, at inserting a feeding tube into my vena cava vein resulted in major blood clotting. After several days in intensive care Gina and I begged the doctors to release me and to let me at least try to eat and drink enough to stay alive. So, with the hope that I could take in and retain just enough nutrients and fluids to stay alive and praying to God, I was released. As I write this, it has been three-and-a-half years.

My diet became quite simple; I call it my "bring it on diet." Whatever food there is, bring it on! With lots of meals, three liters of fluids daily, hyper-intake of vitamins and mineral supplements, a couple of strategic medicines, and my abbreviated intestine has adapted and is working overtime to keep me alive.

So, now am I healed? Nope, still not.

As the reader can imagine, this disease has taken a great toll on my body. Low energy levels, pain and other limitations present lots of challenges to living a somewhat normal life ~~for sure~~. God has enabled me to continue working strongly in the ministry through the last 40 years. I pastored in two churches for nearly 20 years and have been serving in international missions for 20 more. Many Crohn's sufferers tend to give up on trying to lead as normal a life as possible. Many would never even think about traveling much if at all. Over the years in my extensive traveling I have slept on floors, cots, and missionary kids' beds--in huts, cabins, hovels, the worst of hotels, in taxis, in dilapidated trucks and decrepit busses. I have eaten the most curious things from termites, grasshoppers, grub worms, horse, congealed pork blood, and mare's milk.

Even though I have traveled nearly two million miles and been in 45 countries, it has been amazing how I have been preserved from serious bouts with my Crohn's and related problems. Sure, there have been plenty of times when I have had to combat fatigue, pain, and other things that are just too gross to include. But God has continued to enable and empower me to carry on and to preserve me from serious crises. This has been an extremely gratifying part of my walk with God, watching Him protect and strengthen me as I fulfilled my commitment to His call to full-time ministry. I thoroughly loved those many years in American church pastorates, but when the Lord called us back into an international ministry with Encompass World Partners, it was deeply meaningful. To have the extensive missionary involvement that we have had over these many years and yet, to be able to remain living in the United States near the health care I have needed, is a stunning example of God's grace and blessing.

### **LET'S GO BACK TO NAZARETH**

So if I had been there that day in Nazareth would I have pushed my way to the front of that line for Jesus to heal me? Absolutely, if all I knew about Jesus was what those in Nazareth understood. But the Jesus I now know changes my response. The answer for most people would be obvious. I have to admit that it would be nice to be healed – no more chronic pain, no more swelling and bloating, no more bleeding, diarrhea, or surgeries. Who wouldn't want relief from all that?

If I had a choice to be healed of my disease and all of its attending issues today, would I choose healing? I have been asked this question several times. It may sound like a simple question with an easy answer. It's not. There would be reasons to say "no." There would be reasons to say "yes." I really don't know. It's a good question that is loaded with implications. Of course, Jesus has never asked me if I wanted to be healed. I assumed for a long time that He did want that for me and there have been lots of people who believe that it is a foregone conclusion—that Jesus wants me and everyone else to be healed, too. The most misguided and hurtful are those who make the amount or strength of one's faith the prime factor in healing.

If Jesus' overriding desire was that everyone be healed, then how could He have indicted the people of His own hometown and walked away from them having done no miracles? Does God want people healed? In the overwhelming majority of cases (probably somewhere above 99%) the answer is obviously something other than "yes." The answer, however, is not so much "no" as it is, "Keep asking until your request changes. But, you will discover in the process something you will appreciate more than if I healed you."

### **WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM PAIN, SUFFERING, TRIALS AND CRISIS**

#### **1. The Planet and People are Broken**

People were broken in the garden and have not yet been fixed. Every human who has ever been born has been born broken. I am speaking, of course, in physical terms. No miracle has fixed that aspect of the fall. Death still is the inevitable end of our physical existence. Though the Bible doesn't say so, it's likely that everyone who was ever healed by God still eventually died. A multitude of people who feasted on bread and fish still had to eat again a few hours later. God picked particular situations to perform particular miracles for particular purposes. But the basic brokenness was never healed. If God healed me of my Crohn's, I still would wear glasses, occasionally get the flu, and have arthritis in my right leg.

The earth is broken and groans, and the result includes natural disasters: disasters that naturally happen. To some people the source of a crisis or catastrophe seems so important. Are crises a result of the natural processes of a broken planet? Yes. They nearly always are. Can God cause crises and suffering? Of course, but it's rare. Can Satan? Sure. Can people? Yep. The source isn't that important because most often we simply do not know. The reason for catastrophe or disease can be very important, but often we still do not know the reason even if we know the source. It is the response that is of supreme importance.

So, what's the source of my disease? Actually, no one knows. Did God give it to me? No. Allowing something is not the same as giving something. But did God intend for me to have it? "Absolutely." After all, there are many cases of God's allowing and using disease, pain, suffering, and disasters to fit His purposes. Did Satan give it to me? I don't know. If so, then, consistent with the Scriptures, it would once again be only as God allowed it. Or, is it just the outcome of the physical decline in the human race and a manifestation of the deterioration of the human immune system? That is my firm belief. The source or the reason is not so important, and I no longer even wonder or care. How I respond to my illness, however, is what is most important.

### The Believer's Response to Crisis, Suffering, and Pain

The Bible is consistent in its instruction about how to respond to crisis and suffering. Job's tragedies were all a result of Satan's taunting of God. It was Job's exemplary testimony of faith that provoked it. He got hammered because he was so righteous. It was Job's profound faith that also enabled him to withstand the assaults of the wicked one. Throughout the New Testament the writers remind us that suffering is to be welcomed, not resisted, met with rejoicing, and recognized as a source of learning and the deepening of our faith.

"Dear brothers and sisters when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy." Really! James' words (James 1.2) might be easy to swallow if one is talking about having a head cold or a broken leg. But these words equally apply to the perspective that one should have toward any "troubles" no matter their intensity or severity. James goes on to explain why, the reason. When faith is put to the test, it grows your endurance. When endurance grows fully, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing. The rejoicing attitude we are to have is not in expectation of a healing or a life without crisis. It is a rejoicing that points to the greater goal that our faith in Christ produces—needing nothing.

### 2. God's Plan For Us Requires Suffering

God's Plan for us is so different from the one we have for ourselves. I love that passage in Hebrews 12 that reminds us that "earthly fathers do not know how to discipline their children like God does." It's so true. The proper balance between correction and encouragement is seldom achieved. Unbalanced correction can so easily become abuse. Unbalanced encouragement can so easily become indulgence. The default impulse in the heart of most parents is protectionism. Since parents do not have the sovereign and eternal perspective of God, they are much more protecting than even he is. Consequently one parenting skill that is largely missing from an earthly father's skills in disciplining his children is the use of pain. "No discipline is enjoyable while it is happening; it's painful (v. 11). Believe me, if my parents could have stopped me from being afflicted by this disease, they would have. But God didn't,

and He's the perfect Father, knowing what will make me a better person. Because of their love, my parents would more likely have insulated me from some of the greatest lessons of life that I could learn only through my suffering. Because of God's love for me, He dare not withhold the pain and suffering. As hard as it is to apply the same biblical principles to major catastrophes and suffering on a grand scale, they are nonetheless true and applicable.

### 3. God Himself Suffers

God completely understands our suffering because He suffers, too. Many of the negative emotions that are attributed to God – anger, wrath, agony, displeasure, grieving, etc. – are expressions of suffering. When His will and love are not obeyed, He experiences pain.

Something changed in the Godhead when Jesus took on human form. God no longer saw and felt the human experience from a single, outside perspective as almighty God. When God became as much human as divine, He did so permanently. Today Jesus is still in human form (Phil 3.20-21, Acts 1.9-11). We believers relish the image of Christ in His glorified state, sitting in authority and power at the right hand of the Father.

To see Jesus as a suffering Savior is a less than satisfying image to most of us. We imagine that once Jesus bowed His head and gave up His spirit that His suffering was finally over. When we gaze deeply into His suffering – the persecution, beatings, shameful debasement, the unfathomable agony of soul that squeezed blood into His sweat, the fool's crown, the thrust spear – we feel pain, anger, sympathy, and sadness. Because we know the whole story, we can only imagine His pain as we view it backwards through our fuller knowledge of His regained life and power. But Philippians reminds us that we cannot know the Savior completely without comprehending and experiencing the fellowship of His suffering.

God is still suffering, not on the cross but because of the cross. He longs for the completion of the redemption when all things are finally made new. It is difficult to conceive of a God of love with suffering, loss, and pain. The offer of His love and subsequent sacrifice is received or rejected. The accepted sacrifice brings joy to Christ. Rejected, it brings agony.

We have not well understood or have forgotten that at the instant that death crashed into human existence through sin, God began sharing in the effects of this death in His own person, an inexplicable pain of betrayal and separation within His once holy creation. He is touched and affected by the suffering of His children. Contrary to the skeptic's view of God, He is anything but an aloof, passive, or self-interested God. Just as in the cross of Christ, perhaps His greatest purposes still come from the greatest suffering.

### 4. God's Power Works Best in Weakness

One of the passages of Scripture that has been a great encouragement to my soul in the face of my weakness is 2 Corinthians 4, which says, "Our bodies are made of clay yet we have the treasure of the Good News in them. This shows that the superior power of this treasure belongs to God and doesn't come from us." And a few chapters later Paul speaks of the gift he was given, a messenger of Satan to torment him and keep him from being proud. "Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. Each time He said, 'My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.' So now I am glad to

boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. That's why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak then I am strong (12.9-10). When I am strong, I am strong. When I am weak, He is strong. God's strength and my strength combat against each other and cannot occupy the same space at the same time.

## 5. Suffering and Crisis Are Not All about Those Who Suffer

Would you rather be healed or the healer? Would you rather be the hurting or the comforter? Would you rather be starving or the one who feeds the hungry? Would you rather be in the earthquake or the relief worker? Would you rather be me, or Gina, my wife? I suspect that none of us want to be the one who suffers. The task of the healer, however, is not an easy one either. When I reflect on the years of sacrificial love and care that Gina has graciously provided me, I am immensely grateful. From the descriptions of my suffering one can just imagine how many anxious hours she has spent sitting in surgical waiting rooms, in hospital rooms, doctors offices, ICU departments, and in those back bedrooms of our home feeling worn down by sleepless nights and sometimes, fear. The very love she has for me is the biggest drain to her energy. The depth of her caring is often the measure of her fatigue.

Crises, suffering, sickness, and brokenness provide an avenue for the expression of God's love through others. My illness isn't just for me. It is also for Gina. God gave her very distinct gifts that exactly match my need. She is one of the most practical, efficient, and administratively wired people I know. It's the way she serves. It's the way she shows love. Her attention to detail and tactics surrounds me with a sense of security and confidence. It contrasts with my bent toward feelings, analysis, emotion, and the relational side of things. She was given these abilities for my benefit, of course, but also for hers. In the expressing of who she is there is a fulfillment of God's design and a satisfaction in being a conduit of the love of God to the hurting. My crisis is her opportunity.

In the same way, I believe that since the world is broken and catastrophes happen, God gifts and mobilizes people to be responders to these tragedies—to be ministers of love, mercy, and healing to the broken, the diseased, the outcast, the abused, and to the loved ones of those who perish. Crises are not caused for the love of God to shine out, but since they are inevitable, so is the grace and love of God to distribute His ambassadors of mercy throughout the world to respond to the pain. The tragedy is not only about the one who suffers.

There is always an epilogue

As this story has indicated in numerous places, there is more to come. There is a meta-story and an aftermath that in the moment cannot be seen. Some catastrophes happen in a moment, some throughout a lifetime or an age. Throughout the Scriptures we witness many disasters and crises. Every one of them had a greater good that was part of the story. We know this because we have the Scriptures, of course. Then why can't we recognize that today God has a greater good in mind as He allows the brokenness of His creation to crumble and run its course.

Six days after the 2004 Tsunami in southern Thailand, I was riding and walking through the rubble of this devastated coastline of Khao Lak. The pictures in my mind still bring an ache to my soul—the stench of the morgues and the smell of the smoke from the Buddhist crematoriums, the now non-



existent towns, the huge fishing boats that were deposited on high inland hills, the wailing of the Thai and tourist families as they recognize the picture of their loved one(s) posted on the walls of the dead, a child's flip-flop wedged into the branches of a ravaged tree.

Along with lots of other people, I returned to the scene as a responder to this crisis, bringing teams and aid. The years have passed and I have had the opportunity to talk with friends and other workers who continued to minister in this coastline area of Thailand. What a contrast and a joy to hear of the many Thai who have become followers of Jesus Christ and of the existence now of many new church communities in that area. While God's epilogue doesn't necessarily reduce the ache of the tragic scenes embedded in my mind and heart, His epilogue does remind us that God has a plan and a purpose for suffering that is higher and greater.

Nazareth response...or the response of faith?

So which will it be? Get a Savior that works like we want Him to work and does what we want Him to do? Or will we choose to be okay with what God wants to do, when He wants to do it, and in the way He wants to do it?