HOW I LEARNED TO LEAD FROM BROKENNESS

Rick Warren's Ministry Toolbox
www.pastors.com
Issue 167 | 8 November 2004

BY PAUL CARLISLE

How could I be depressed? I was a pastor and professional counselor. I believed I was immune to the despairing grasp of clinical depression. So when it placed its icy fingers around my life, I was shocked! I could not shake it no matter how much I read the Bible and prayed. I was not sure I would survive my bout with the BEAST.

DANCING WITH DEPRESSION

I know many other pastors and Christian leaders have or will encounter this type of brokenness. Remember, you are not the first one to travel this dark and precarious path. I survived and would like to serve as your guide and companion on the journey from despair to deliverance to joy. Let me begin by telling you my story:

In the summer of 1994 I was finishing up a summer vacation when I got the news that my dad had died in delirium tremens. He was unable to get the alcohol his body craved resulting in a massive heart attack that took his life instantly. I was shocked and numb.

I flew to Texas and performed my dad's funeral then returned to my family in North Carolina. All I remember about those days was my being deeply fatigued and profoundly exhausted. I continued to prepare messages for the church and prepare for the next semester of teaching at seminary. I was not ready for what was about to take place.

One morning, without warning, I fell to the kitchen floor in front of my wife. I was arrested by a pain I'd never known. I was light-headed and disoriented. I couldn't concentrate. I felt like someone had unplugged my brain. Hope suddenly drained from my body and darkness slowly enveloped me to the point of suffocation. Anxiety velcroed itself to me as a permanent partner. I didn't know it at the time, but I'd come perilously near an incapacitating emotional and mental breakdown.

Depression is an invisible cancer that slowly drains your will to live. It leaves you stripped of heart and hope. Happiness is replaced with horror. For me, anxiety racked my body and mind to the point that death would've been welcomed. I dreaded bedtime because I was doomed to lie in the bed watching the clock at 30 minute intervals as terror stalked me until dawn. I would awake unsure if I could survive the day. Often I would experience such fear and panic upon waking that all I could do was embrace my wife Terri and sob uncontrollably with groans I did not understand.

Where was God? I cried out and cried out, yet my heavenly Father was silent. A growing fear of betrayal and abandonment gripped my heart. Never had I known such aloneness. The fear of losing God would literally cause my body to shake and tremble. I could not understand what was happening tome.

I would have run away if I could have. However, I was sure that this would provide no relief. Yet – when the despair would mount a heightened attack – I would get in my Mazda truck and drive for half an hour or so hoping to distance myself from the darkness.

Self-hate assaulted me daily. I felt like such a wretch of a person, unworthy of anything good. I could not free myself from the thought that my dad's death was somehow my fault. My mind was sure that it was alcohol and dad's poor choices that killed him, yet something inside continued to point an accusing finger at me. I reasoned that I was a minister, a seminary professor and a professional counselor and surely that should have been enough equipment to enable me to rescue Dad. It was not.

I was beginning to think that I would never be back to normal. I could not remember the last time I laughed or felt peaceful. My body had taken about all it could. I was losing hope that there would ever be a way out.

HOW BROKENNESS IMPACTED MY MINISTRY

I thought I would have to leave the ministry because I was nearly debilitated mentally, physically, emotionally and spiritually. I prepared sermons and class lectures only with the greatest effort. Like Charles Haddon Spurgeon, 'the chariot wheels dragged.'

Meeting with people, which had been a real joy earlier, I now dreaded. I knew I had nothing to offer them. How could I save anyone from drowning when I was sinking myself? What if they could see through my thin veneer of 'okayness?' I prayed that it would not happen but feared that it would.

The physical exhaustion was with me all day and night. I was sure that others could see that I was not doing my job adequately. Questions overwhelmed me: Would others see my tiredness and complain? Would they understand why my energy is depleted? Would they think I am lazy or crazy? Would I lose my job? These ideas plagued me constantly.

The worst part of the depression and brokenness was the spiritual doubts that swarmed me incessantly – like a hundred mosquitoes. I was helpless to fend them off. No

matter what I tried to do, I would hear these dark phrases. 'God will not help you.' 'God has gone.' 'You are not a Christian.' 'God does not exist.' 'Maybe God is not good and loving.' 'God is hurting you.'

Facing these thoughts left me with very little desire to tell others about our marvelous God. This was a real problem because my total identity involved relating Jesus to others. The spiritual and emotional doubt was destroying my hold on the only anchor in my life – God! The result was spiritual paralysis. The alternative to admitting my doubt and paralysis was to fake it – and at this point I did not have the physical energy to be phony. I learned to be real because I had no other choice. *Desperation gave birth to authenticity.*

THE PATH OF HEALING

Praise our magnificent Savior for 'severe mercy!' What I discovered is **brokenness is purposeful and seasonal**. By purposeful I mean brokenness invites us to a deeper and richer intimacy with Christ.

Seasonal means that it has a beginning and an end. Thank you, Jesus, for brokenness having a completion point. Here is the way God brought me through the darkness:

1. **Medical help was essential to my healing** My family physician, a former missionary doctor, tried to treat the depression with medication but was unsuccessful. He referred me to a Christian psychiatrist who had expertise with my malady. I felt tremendous shame that I was so weak and broken that I had to be treated by a psychiatrist. Yet the pain inside was so acute that I would do anything to get help. Prescribed medications finally broke the insomnia cycle,
quieted the anxiety and enabled me to think again. At this juncture I was able to begin the hard work of healing brokenness as a result of childhood experiences of physical abuse. But medications alone were not enough to heal my broken and damaged heart.
2. **Friends who were supportive** God graciously provided me with four friends to walk with me through the darkness (two pastors, a colleague from seminary and a lay person). I cannot tell you how important these people were to my being able to successfully navigate the white waters of darkness to the light. The most significant thing they did for me was 'be present.' Being present seems like a simple gift, until you need that gift.

Most people wanted to give me a 'quick fix.' My pain somehow threatened them. My God-given companions gave me something more valuable than a fix; they gave me themselves. **Being in brokenness was like being in a raging river that stripped the life jacket from my body.** I was at the mercy of the river named 'darkness.'

These four friends of mine, along with my wife and a faithful psychiatrist, did a courageous thing: they jumped in the dangerous waters, swam out to me and held on. This allowed me to have some sense of stability and hope. Many people yelled suggestions and admonitions from the safety of the shore, but they did me little good because I was at the mercy of the river. But those who loved my soul and jumped in the river with me, brought a healing to my heart that is indescribable. Their actions communicated, "We are here and we won't leave you." It was awesome!

My faith was beginning to be reactivated. My experience with these soul-mates reflected the rich relationship shared by Jonathan and David in 1 Samuel.

Besides intimate friends, my wife Terri played a major role in my healing. Her love and support for me were never so obvious as when I was in the darkness. She held onto God with one hand and me with the other. I know she had great trouble understanding just what was happening to me, but she never once stopped believing God would bring us through.

My heavenly Father was doing a marvelous work in my life that was far beyond my feeble comprehension and understanding. He was tearing down and destroying, so he could plant and build (Jeremiah 1). The problem was that all I could see was the 'tearing down' part. I felt at times like he was killing me. I had no way of knowing that he was about to do a magnificent work in my life. My depression showed how much I tried to CONTROL everything in my life. I could talk of trusting God, but in reality I only trusted myself. Believing in a kingdom that was bigger than mine was slow in coming, but I was taking some baby steps.

I wrestled with the depression for the better part of two years. This was the most difficult time I had ever known in my spiritual journey. Yet, the brokenness gave birth to a dynamic and rich relationship with God that I had never before experienced. Never in my wildest dreams had I known that Christ could provide such peace, security, purpose and confidence. I say glory to him! He alone is worthy of my praise! The barren land of brokenness was the door to unfathomable intimacy with God. So **hang on during the darkness because it will bear the fruit of enthusiastic love and devotion for God.** It will be worth it after all!

PRACTICAL HELPS

The brokenness forced me to change my frantic pace of life. If you could have seen how busy I was, you would have thought I believed the Bible said, 'Be hyper and know that I am God.' I had replaced intimacy with God with frenzied activity. I had to learn to stop going Mach 4 speed in a camel body. Imitating Martha came naturally but the ways of Mary were foreign to me (Luke 10).

WHY MUST I DO THIS?
To get a handle on my fast-paced life style, I began to have people whom I trusted look at my calendar to see if I was overloading. This was really helpful. Before adding something to my calendar I would ask myself, “Why must I do this?" This helped me uncover the fear of rejection that drove me to do more and more. I chose to learn the way of stillness and solitude with God. At first I could only tolerate short moments with the Master, but as our relationship developed I hungered for more and more time with him. Minutes turned to hours and hours to days. I was learning to live life radically differently ~ more dependent on Christ. That was one of the main purposes of my brokenness. In these lessons of stillness, God taught me the importance of letting others minister to me.

Let me offer you some suggestions on establishing soul-mate intimacy:

First, ask God to provide intimate friends that will love you with all their heart. This type of relationship needs to be initiated and maintained by the Spirit of God.

Second, approach those that are presently available and see if you sense any type of openness to a deepening relationship with you. If you think the person is a possible candidate, be more direct about pursuing a friendship with them. It takes time to know if the person will be one with whom you can share your deepest fears and joys, so be patient. Because of this, we need to develop this type of rapport with a few people before we experience a despairing brokenness.

Third, be yourself. A time of brokenness is not the time to act like you are OK. Peel off all masks and false images. Let the intimate friends see you as you really are. This will require a deep trust in God on your part, especially if you have never done this before.

Last, meet with your intimate friends regularly. I suggest weekly. This will allow the Spirit of God to deepen the friendship and minister consistently to your heart. Use these suggestions as guidelines as you connect yourself with those God brings along side of you.

Leading from brokenness
Leading from brokenness is one of the most fulfilling experiences I have ever known. I no longer am dominated by a fear of rejection. **The brokenness produced a security in Christ that is unshakable!** Gone is the fear of having to please the deacons, elders, president or leader of the women's auxiliary. The fear has been replaced with an unimaginable sense of security and confidence in Christ.

The brokenness has taught me it is OK to be human. I can admit I really don't know it all. I better relate to my congregation and students because I can admit and accept my limits. I find that parishioners and students are attracted to my honesty. It's a tremendous relief to not ‘fake’ spiritual vitality. Another benefit of knowing my humanity is being empowered with the empathy of Christ. Helping others is becoming more joyful day by day.

The brokenness has convinced me of God's faithful presence. **I no longer have to make myself believe God; I really do!** This is still a bit of a mystery to me. Gone are the days of having to tell myself that God is faithful, and that he really does love me. I am certain of this from the tip of my head to the end of my big toe. What a joy this is!

The brokenness has introduced me to God's ‘easy yoke’ and ‘light burden.’ I know what it means to be yoked with him in ministry. It is a joy unspeakable! I am ‘learning of him.’ This means a life-long process or journey. It is my prayer for you that you will allow brokenness to have its perfect work that you may walk in a richness of life that only can be explained by the transformational work of the Holy Spirit.

PURPOSE-DRIVEN®
Paul Carlisle is a professor at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and author of Strength for the Journey: A Biblical Perspective on Depression and Discouragement (LifeWay, 1999) and With All Mv Heart: God's Design for Emotional Wellness (LifeWay, 2000).