

## **Healing in Suffering** **Megan Hjelmstad**

Hi there I'm Megan Hjelmstad, and as we continue to respond to God's invitation for greater healing, we'll be talking today about healing in the midst of physical suffering.

### **Opening Prayer**

Let's pray. *In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen. Come Holy Spirit, come Lord Jesus healer and Redeemer. Lord we thank you for our suffering, for the ways that you have accomplished so much healing and redemption in the midst of it, even when we're not aware. Lord we ask for the grace to receive your presence in the midst of our suffering, that we might unite that suffering to you, and that out of our pain you can bring so much goodness, healing, redemption and love, that we might become co redeemers with you our Lord.*

*We ask for our suffering not to be wasted, that through it, we might bring about your desire for your kingdom here on earth Lord. We thank you, we praise you, we bless you, we adore you even in the most difficult moments, and we pray all of this your most holy precious name, Lord Jesus Christ, and through the immaculate heart of Mary, Amen. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*

### **Personal Painful Suffering**

I have been through and I'm going through a lot of physical suffering in my life. Starting around the age of 14, I began dealing with a very painful problem, condition called endometriosis. I ended up having to have four surgeries and after the fourth surgery, I lost my ability to have more children.

As a result of this painful condition, which praise God, the surgeries were able to slowly take care of, I also developed a lot of digestive issues and it got to the point where I had to reduce my intake of food, the specific foods I was eating so much, that I became limited to about 12 foods total, for about the past five years, I haven't been able to eat the same foods as my family, go to restaurants, partake in meals with loved ones or at social gatherings, and the pain has not just been physical, it's been very difficult, emotionally, immensely too, very isolating. Praise God, I'm going through treatments now that are slowly helping to get to the root of those digestive issues and expand my diet slightly, but it'll probably never be the same.

About two years ago, I started dealing with some very odd symptoms of pain in my hands and my feet, and then my back and this past year was finally able to receive a diagnosis that provided clarity, but unfortunately, I also found out that it's not going to get better. It's a degenerative spine condition called ankylosing spondylitis. And in addition to that, in all that testing that I was doing, I also found out that I have a rare condition in my neck, the veins and arteries that will require another surgery which I was hoping to avoid but won't this coming year.

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I have dealt with a lot of suffering in the past 25 plus years, and I have prayed and prayed and begged the Lord for physical healing that has not necessarily happened, I've prayed novenas, I've asked specific saints, I've gone to Lourdes, I've had people bring me Lourdes' healing water, I've received the anointing of the sick several times, several times. Often daily I still deal with great physical discomfort and pain, and yet in all of this, instead of my faith becoming weaker, it has only gotten stronger. I still have my moments to be sure of wrestling and crying out to the Lord and moments of despair, but overall, I have only grown in my faith, experienced deep relationship with the Lord, spiritual consolation that doesn't make sense in the midst of my circumstances.

And if you had me look at all of the physical growth or rather the spiritual growth that I've gained over the past 25 plus years and said, would you like to trade that for physical comfort? I would honestly have to say no, that I would keep all of the physical suffering in order to maintain that spiritual growth.

So, what is this paradox? What is this paradox of being in great suffering, but also being able to grow closer to the Lord? Well, in all of it, I've learned the Lord has taught me, that we are never powerless in our suffering, we are never powerless in our suffering and that's where we're going to go, we're going to really dive into how the Lord gives us not only strength, but invites us into great, great mission in the midst of our suffering.

### Why is Suffering Allowed?

But before we go there, it's important to talk about the question of suffering. When we hear about suffering, when we experience suffering, one of the most difficult problems we have, is asking how can a good God allow such suffering? How can a good God allow this evil? And here's the first answer, the first answer is that God does not cause evil, He does not will evil and suffering, He never can, He never could, it's against His nature and He never will. God is only goodness and only love. The evil itself and the suffering itself comes from Satan. And the reason that we experience it is because we live in a fallen world, we live in a fallen world. It's not a one for one, I've done something bad and therefore I experience suffering or I'm good and therefore I don't suffer, that's not how any of it works, but we do live in a fallen world, where evil has consequences.

And so, even though God does not will suffering, and even though it's the enemy's fault, he tries to make it look like God's fault, but it's really the enemy's fault, we can still wonder why isn't God doing something about it. God is more powerful than Satan, why isn't He taking this suffering away? And the answer to that is honestly a mystery, but a small part of that answer, is that our Lord will only allow in His permissive will, the suffering that has the potential to bring about our greater good and a greater good than the suffering itself. So, our God will only allow suffering if it has the potential for a greater goodness and greater redemption than the evil that the enemy intends it for.

Now this of course requires our cooperation, it requires our cooperation, and when we say that we are not powerless in suffering, it means that we have to respond, we have to respond to that invitation. My spiritual growth that I shared about, I can only attribute to God's grace and my

meager attempts to offer my suffering, unite my suffering to the Lord in a particular way, so that He had permission to bring good out of it.

## Offering Up Our Suffering

So, we can offer up our suffering, but what does this mean? A lot of times we hear the term offer it up and it sounds like, suck it up. Well, that's not what any of it means. Offering it up, uniting our suffering to Christ's suffering on the cross, means that we allow God to use it for good, it means that we give Him permission to make it useful and to make it fruitful in a way we never could, and He can make it fruitful instead of futile like the enemy intends it to be. So, when we look at Christ's cross, we see that Christ on from the cross, on the cross, He wasn't suffering to save himself, He didn't need to save himself, He was suffering for our sake to save us, and that is what we are invited into.

When we say that we are offering our suffering, it means we are taking the suffering, the difficulty, the pain that we are dealing with in the moment and we're saying, Lord, I give this to you, I offer it to you, I invite you into it, so that you can use it for good. And if we are to love like Christ, as God commands us, we are to love like Christ and Christ offers His suffering, His cross for the sake of others, we have to ask, how are we using our suffering, uniting our suffering to Him for the sake of others? Of course, we can also offer it for our own salvation because unlike Jesus, we do need to be saved, but our suffering is not just about us, Christ cross was not just about Him, our suffering, our cross is not just about us, it's for the sake of others as well.

So, when we offer our cross, our suffering in union with Christ, it allows us to enter more exclusively into the selfless love of Christ. It allows us to say with Christ, this is my body given up for you, you who I'm offering it for, and it allows God to infuse our suffering with goodness, so that evil becomes redeemed, and instead of bringing death, it brings new life, new life. That is what our suffering has the potential to do. When we offer it to God, He sanctifies it, He redeems it and He makes us, He makes us co-redeemers with His son, co-redeemers with Christ for the sake of others.

## Saving Souls Through Suffering

In Saint Faustina's diary, Christ says something so beautiful and it's become basically my anthem in all these years of suffering that I can repeat often, He says to Saint Faustina, "My daughter, I want to instruct you on how you are to rescue souls through sacrifice and prayer" You will save more souls through prayer and suffering, than will a missionary through his teachings and sermons alone. You will save more souls through prayer and suffering than a missionary through all of his teachings and sermons. Further, as Christ is telling Saint Faustina how He desires for us to accept suffering with love, He says, "do not be afflicted if your heart often experiences repugnance and dislike for sacrifice, all its power rests in the will." And so these contrary feelings far from lowering the value of the sacrifice in my eyes, will enhance it. It's all about the will, all its power rests in the will.

So, in suffering with God and offering it to God, we are never useless, we are powerful beyond belief. We always have something to give to contribute, we always have with God's grace the

power to crush the head of Satan, simply by lying in bed and lifting our pain to the Lord. So how do we practically offer it up? What does this look like on a very practical level day to day when we're in the midst of suffering, and sometimes we can't think of anything beyond this is so difficult, this hurts so much?

### Do it in the Morning

Well, I'll offer you three practical things that have really helped me in being able to be more aware of offering my suffering throughout my life. The first thing I'll offer is a good morning offering. In the morning when we pray, we can offer to God everything that's going to happen in our day in advance, and as we offer these things, we can include our sufferings. There are even memorized morning offerings that are written out that you can look up that talk about offering all of your prayers, your works, your joys and your sufferings of the day, in union with Jesus for the sake of your soul, for the sake of other souls, you can offer it in advance. You can look it up and pray it every day, you can memorize it, or you can simply do it in your own words.

This morning as I was getting out of bed, I know that as I get out of bed oftentimes that's when I experience some of my worst pain because my back has really stiffened up overnight, and so I was getting ready to get out of bed and just imagining in my mind lifting up all of these little sufferings and all of the things that I was thinking ahead to in my day all of the conversations, all of the difficulties, all of the struggles, anything I wanted help with, in addition to all of my sufferings, I was just imagining lifting it up and placing each one in the Lord's hands, in the safety of His hands so that He could take it and use it for good, for my redemption and for others redemption.

### Be Real with God

The second thing I'll offer is to allow yourself to be real with God. Be real with God in the moment in your suffering. Sometimes all you're going to have to offer in the moment is this is really hard and it hurts, and I just want it to go away, even that you can offer to the Lord. Because when we invite His presence in, He gives us grace, His presence, He comes alongside us and He gives us strength and fortitude to suffer through those agonizing moments. Whereas without Him, all we have is a void in which the enemy tries to rush and fill with despair. So in those moments, when we have nothing other than to say this is so hard, say it to God, tell Him about it, and in those temptations to despair, He will give us the strength to instead in that offering to Him, bring life, bring hope for ourselves and for others. There's an Ignatian principle in the rules of discernment that talks about in temptation to bring it into the light. And so when we tell God about it, we are literally doing that, we are bringing it into His light so He can shine the light of healing and truth and redemption on it and keep us safe from a Satan's temptations to despair and death.

### Give Particular Intentions

The last thing I'll offer is to allow yourself to assign particular intentions to suffering. It might be in your morning offering that you say I'm offering this entire day for fill in the blank, maybe it's a person going through a really difficult situation, maybe it's your child or your family, maybe

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it's another loved one, maybe it's someone who is close to death. We have the power to offer for very specific intentions, and we have the assurance, not only of Christ talking to St. Faustina of how powerful this is, but we have many stories of saints that assure us of the power of our particular offerings.

### Suffering is a Powerful Gift

When Saint Therese was in her convent at Carmel, she would offer doing the laundry for her bishop, unbeknownst to her, her bishop was going through an extremely difficult time, and one day after he had gone through that really difficult time he went to visit the convent, and as she walked by with a group of nuns he asked some other superior, who is that sister? And it was because he had had a dream in which the Lord showed him, that it was this particular nun's sacrifices and offerings that had gotten him through his difficulties. All she did at the beginning of doing her laundry was say, Lord I offer this for my bishop, that's how powerful it is. She also confided in a priest that as she approached her death, she was going to offer her death for all the infants baptized that day. On the day of her death, none other than the future Pope Paul VI, was baptized, how incredible.

So suffering, it finds us either way, we experience difficulty in this world either way, without God, it's merely evil and pain, but with God, it becomes sacrifice infused with love, it becomes the thing that the enemy is most afraid of, because it has the power to crush his intent, to bring us into death and instead bring about new life, freedom and redemption.

One last story, John Paul II when he was Pope, he had a group of priests and seminarians visiting him, and one had broken his leg, and as he approached Saint John Paul II, he sort of bent down for his blessing but kind of held out his leg as kind of a woe is me, look at me, I'm suffering, and St. John Paul II leaned into him, and he tapped his cast and said, don't waste your suffering. Friends our suffering is a powerful gift, with the power to heal and redeem us from the inside out, not just for temporary relief, but for all of eternity, for the goodness and the safety and the provision, of life happily ever after with our Lord.

Our suffering has the power to help redeem others in union with Christ for that same goal, for happiness and salvation forever with the Lord. Our time, our discomfort on this earth is fleeting, but our life is eternal, let's not waste our suffering. Let's allow the Lord to use it for our good and the good of others.

### Closing Prayer

Let's pray. *In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen. All glory be to the Father, to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be world without end, Amen. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen*