

PARTICIPANT GUIDE

A CRAZY,
HOLY
GRACE

The Healing Power *of* Pain and Memory

FREDERICK
BUECHNER

Contents

Introduction.....	7
Session 1: The Gates of Pain.....	13
Session 2: A Crazy, Holy Grace	33
Session 3: The Magical Room of Memory	53
Session 4: The Struggle and Hope of Memory	75
Notes.....	93



Session 1

The Gates of Pain





Session 1

The Gates of Pain

SUMMARY

The Universality of Pain

Frederick Buechner remembers a night when he was a boy when his mother told him to keep his father's car keys away from him because he had been drinking. His father came into Buechner's bedroom and asked for the keys, but Buechner said nothing. He clutched the keys in his fist under his pillow and kept the bedcovers over his head until his father fell asleep. It is one of Buechner's early experiences and memories of pain.

Buechner acknowledges pain's universality: "No matter who you are, how lucky or unlucky, or rich or poor, or this or that, part of what it means to be a human being in this world is to labor and be heavy laden, to be in need of whatever [Jesus] means by rest."

He discusses four principal ways people attempt to cope with pain, although he allows that there are many others, most or all of which most of us have tried, at some time and to some degree:

1. **We can try to forget our pain.** Buechner says this is how his mother dealt with the pain of his father's suicide (when Buechner was ten years old) and two unsuccessful marriages. This option of dealing with pain costs us the chance to grow as compassionate human beings. We fail to open ourselves to the reality that we are not the only people who feel pain.
2. **We become trapped in our pain.** Buechner illustrates this survival method by discussing two of Charles Dickens's characters—Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* and Mrs. Gummidge in *David Copperfield*—who allow their pain to define and confine them.
3. **We make light of our pain.** Buechner remembers a friend's daughter who told him how terrible her marriage was but who laughed about it, as though it were a joke.
4. **We compete with other people's pain.** In this survival method, pain "becomes a kind of accomplishment." "You think you've had it bad?" we ask others. "Let me tell you what's happened to me!"

Good Stewardship of Pain

In contrast to these ways of coping with pain, Buechner suggests living as a "good steward" of our pain. He explains what he means by discussing Jesus' Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30 NRSV).

In Buechner's reading of this parable, the talents the master gives his servants represent "whatever it is that life deals us," including our experiences of suffering and pain. The servant who buries his talent out of fear angers his master because the master expected him to do something productive with what he'd been

given. Similarly, God “expects that out of whatever the world in its madness does to us, we will somehow reap a harvest.”

Buechner stresses he does not believe that God causes pain, but that God does expect us to find treasure in it, treasure that we can then share with others. The single-talent servant’s fate at the parable’s end is not so much a punishment as a consequence of his failure to be a good steward of his pain: “If you bury your life—if you don’t face, among other things, your pain—your life shrinks. . . . It is in a way taken away.” When we “bury whatever it is that the world gives [us], and then live as carefully as [we] can without really living at all,” we “have less life every day.” Buechner compares the third servant’s situation to a cricket he found trapped in his room: “To live closed up in yourself, as that cricket was closed up in the room, is itself wailing and gnashing of teeth.”

The other two servants, by contrast, “traded” with their pain. They gave of themselves to others by honestly living out of their pain. Buechner experienced the power of such “life-traders” for himself when his friends went out of their way to visit him while his eldest daughter was sick in a hospital, almost dying of anorexia. “They offered no suffocating good advice,” he recalls, “or platitudinous explanations of why bad things happen to reasonably good people. They were just there.” Buechner also points to twelve-step groups as places where people are present with each other in the midst of pain—and, as a result, open themselves to new possibilities of healing and life.

“Pain Is Treasure”

Buechner asks why God often seems distant and silent during times of suffering. He decides the silence is actually God’s “passionate restraint”—“As I dream him, he wants so much to be able to step in

and make things right, but how can God do that without destroying what life is all about?” Instead, Buechner suspects God sends people like his friends to be “life-givers, life-savers” who are willing to be present with others in pain and to share that pain with them.

Buechner says our pain is the most precious thing we human beings can give each other. Why? When we relate to each other out of our pain, we relate to each other as who we really are. Buechner wishes he had been able to relate to his father that way on the night he kept the car keys. He wonders how his and his father’s lives might have been different if they had been able to admit their fear to each other that night in Buechner’s room.

And when we speak out of our personal depths, we find ourselves and each other, and even God, in those depths. When we speak with each other out of our pain, that pain can become the gateway to the ultimate joy God has promised.

SCRIPTURE REFLECTION

1. **Matthew 25:14-30**

“The kingdom of heaven is like a man who was leaving on a trip. He called his servants and handed his possessions over to them. To one he gave five valuable coins, and to another he gave two, and to another he gave one. He gave to each servant according to that servant’s ability. Then he left on his journey.

“After the man left, the servant who had five valuable coins took them and went to work doing business with them. He gained five more. In the same way, the one who had two valuable coins gained two more. But the servant who had received

the one valuable coin dug a hole in the ground and buried his master's money.

“Now after a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The one who had received five valuable coins came forward with five additional coins. He said, ‘Master, you gave me five valuable coins. Look, I’ve gained five more.’

“His master replied, ‘Excellent! You are a good and faithful servant! You’ve been faithful over a little. I’ll put you in charge of much. Come, celebrate with me.’

“The second servant also came forward and said, ‘Master, you gave me two valuable coins. Look, I’ve gained two more.’

“His master replied, ‘Well done! You are a good and faithful servant. You’ve been faithful over a little. I’ll put you in charge of much. Come, celebrate with me.’

“Now the one who had received one valuable coin came and said, ‘Master, I knew that you are a hard man. You harvest grain where you haven’t sown. You gather crops where you haven’t spread seed. So I was afraid. And I hid my valuable coin in the ground. Here, you have what’s yours.’

“His master replied, ‘You evil and lazy servant! You knew that I harvest grain where I haven’t sown and that I gather crops where I haven’t spread seed? In that case, you should have turned my money over to the bankers so that when I returned, you could give me what belonged to me with interest. Therefore, take from him the valuable coin and give it to the one who has ten coins. Those who have much will receive more, and they will have more than they need. But as for those who don’t have much, even the little bit

they have will be taken away from them. Now take the worthless servant and throw him outside into the darkness.’

“People there will be weeping and grinding their teeth.”

If you’ve ever worked a job in which you were responsible for accomplishing an important task or producing significant results in your boss’s absence, you may be able to relate to the three servants in what’s popularly known as Jesus’ “Parable of the Talents” (in the Bible, parables have no formal titles unless modern editors put them there). As Buechner recognizes in his imaginative reading of this parable, its main interest is not the talents themselves but what the servants do or fail to do with them.

In the first century, a day laborer would have to work fifteen years to earn one talent.¹ To call this amount a “valuable coin,” as the Common English Bible (CEB) does, hardly does it justice. The master in the story entrusts his servants with enormous sums—even though he himself characterizes them as “little” (25: 21, 23).

Each of the first two servants doubles the amount his master gives them. The story doesn’t say specifically how. The assumption that they “traded with them” (25:16 NRSV) seems reasonable. “Because most people did not have capital available for investment,” notes biblical scholar Craig S. Keener, “those who did could reap large profits,” as do these servants.²

But we shouldn’t let twenty-first-century experiences of investment trading color our ideas about their activity too much. The Greek verb in Matthew 25:16 is *ērgasato*,³ derived from *ērgo*, “to work.” (You might recognize in that word the origin of the “erg” as a scientific unit of work.)⁴ The CEB captures the sense more directly: These servants “went to work doing business” with their talents.

If they traded, they were not far removed from the transactions as modern traders are, buying and selling complicated financial products online at lightning speed. These servants were *working*—putting forth effort, shouldering risk, getting involved in hands-on ways.

For his part, the master, upon his return, doesn't ask *how* the first two servants grew the money. He only praises them for having done it, before rewarding them by giving them more and calling them to celebrate with him. But he condemns the third servant for having done *nothing* with the money—for not even putting it in the ancient equivalent of a minimum interest-bearing savings account!

The third servant was afraid because he thought of his master as “a hard man” (25:24)—that is, a strong and harsh man, a difficult man. And the master confirms the servant's opinion of him, in both word (25:26) and action (25:30).

But he is not so harsh as to reject one servant because he did not produce the same ROI (return on investment) as another. The master says he would have accepted some return, *any* return, from his investment in the third servant (25:27). In this respect, we might even think the master generous! After all, not too many employers would tell their employees during performance reviews, “You didn't make me as much money as so-and-so over there, but I'm thrilled you made me any money at all! Let's go have a drink.” What the master cannot accept is, as Buechner says, the third servant's sloth—his decision to let fear keep him from *working*, as his fellow servants *worked*.

In Matthew, this parable serves as a lesson about how disciples should best use the time before Jesus comes at “the end of the age” (24:3). (Contrast Luke's version, 19:11-27, which highlights the difference between earthly kings and Jesus as king.)⁵ It immediately precedes Jesus' parable about the last judgment, when

When pain is real, why is God silent?

This study will help groups approach and engage the spiritual and theological contemplations in Frederick Buechner's book, *A Crazy, Holy Grace*. Buechner has grappled with the nature of pain, grief, and grace ever since his father committed suicide when he was a young boy. In these essays, the reader finds what Buechner realizes—that the God who might seem so silent is ever near.

This Participant Guide provides an introduction to the main text and can also stand alone with additional commentary and questions for a four-week study. With summaries and commentary for each essay, the guide provides questions and prompts for reflection and discussion.

Also Available:
DVD, Leader Guide

FREDERICK BUECHNER is the author of more than thirty books and has been an important source of inspiration and learning for many readers. A prolific writer, Buechner's books have been translated into twenty-seven languages. A finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, Buechner has been awarded honorary degrees from institutions including Yale University and Virginia Theological Seminary.

MICHAEL S. POTEET is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), serving the larger church as a Christian education writer. He contributes regularly to Cokesbury's *FaithLink* and has authored several Abingdon Press study guides. A member of the Presbytery of Philadelphia, Mike is active as a volunteer Sunday school teacher for children and adults. He is also a freelance blogger and content marketer. He has significant experience in rare books, and unapologetic enthusiasm for fantasy, science fiction and superheroes. Find him on Twitter: @WriterMPoteet.

 Abingdon Press™

www.abingdonpress.com

RELIGION/Christian Life/Spiritual Growth US \$12.99

ISBN-13: 978-1-5018-5831-4



© by Abingdon Press. All rights reserved.