

Discussion questions on the chapter “Broken” from *Life of the Beloved* by Henri Nouwen

1) In this chapter, Nouwen is advising a non-Christian friend on how to respond to the brokenness in his life. The following quotes indicate what Nouwen means by “brokenness”:

- “Our sufferings and pains are not simply bothersome interruptions of our lives” (71)
- “Again and again, I see the immense pain of broken relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, lovers, friends and colleagues. In the Western world, the suffering that seems to be the most painful is that of feeling rejected, ignored, despised and left alone.” (72)
- “...in the society in which you and I live, it is generally an experience of inner brokenness – a brokenness of the heart.” (72)
- “It is where we are most needy and vulnerable that we most experience our brokenness” (74)
- “It is almost always experienced as an unwelcome intrusion into our lives, something that should not be there” (75)
- “When we lose a family member or friend through death, when we become jobless, when we fail an examination, when we live through a separation or divorce, when a war breaks out, an earthquake destroys our home or touches us, the question ‘Why?’ spontaneously emerges.” (78)

Nouwen also says that “the leaders and prophets of Israel, who were clearly chosen and blessed, all lived very broken lives.” What sort of brokenness in the leaders and prophets is he referring to?

2) Tim Keller describes four types of suffering (*Walking With God*, 207-213):

- a) That which **we bring on ourselves**, like Jonah and David, whose sin brought harsh consequences
- b) The suffering of **betrayal**, like that of Paul and Jeremiah, persecuted by those they sought to lead
- c) The suffering of **loss**, like the grief of Mary and Martha
- d) The “suffering of **mystery**”, like that of Job

Which of these categories encompass the “brokenness” of Question 1? Is Nouwen’s advice relevant to the suffering we bring on through our own sinfulness or poor choices?

3) Scripture points to the value of suffering for Christians: suffering allows us to share in God’s holiness and is a sign of his love (Heb 12:5-12); suffering can curtail our pride, as shown in God’s permitting Paul to suffer his “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor 12:7-9); and Christians are to “glory in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope” (Rom 5:3-4).

Nouwen advises his friend to put his brokenness “under the blessing.” In a previous chapter, he explains that this “blessing” is God’s pronouncement to each of us that we are loved and valued by God, that we are image-bearers and, for believers, that Christ lives in us (taking the latter as implied). “We... need an ongoing blessing that allows us to hear in an ever-new way that we belong to a loving God who will never leave us alone, but will remind us always that we are guided by love on every step of our lives” (59).

According to Nouwen, putting our suffering “under the blessing” depends on how we view that suffering: “Even a small burden, perceived as a sign of our worthlessness, can lead us to deep depression—even suicide” (79). How does this compare to the biblical view of suffering?

- 4) (Hypothetically) Convinced that Nouwen’s advice is biblical, you decide to follow it. You are aware that he doesn’t claim it reduces the pain, but can at least bring joy and meaning to your brokenness. How do you “befriend” your brokenness? (Prayer? Journaling? Self-talk? Counseling?)
- 5) The “advice” from our study of Job (so far) might include: Engage with community, engage with God, be transparent with God, suffering can come for many reasons to resist the temptation to see it as punishment, God’s silence does not mean God’s disapproval, we can hear God in many ways—prayer, scripture, friends, nature, literature, etc.—but a bad attitude on our part can also make it difficult to hear God (anything else?). How do these interact with Nouwen’s advice?
- 6) Simone Weil describes how suffering can tempt us toward an unhealthy acceptance, and “little by little, turn the soul into its accomplice, by injecting a poison of inertia into it.” “This complicity impedes all the efforts he might make to improve his lot; it goes so far as to prevent him from seeking a way of deliverance, sometimes even... from wishing for deliverance”¹. As Tim Keller puts it, “it can make you feel noble, and the self-pity can be sweet and addicting” (*Walking with God*, 215). Is there a risk that in befriending your brokenness you might not merely “embrace it”, as a “friend” and “companion” (67) but even wallow in it and become attached to it in an unhealthy way? Are there types of suffering which should not be befriended?
- 7) Last Saturday, November 1st, Brittany Maynard, 29, ended her life, as planned, with a prescribed overdose of barbiturates. Suffering from a brain tumor with a terminal prognosis, she and her husband moved to Oregon, which permits physician-assisted suicide. She chose this path in order to spare herself and her family weeks to months of suffering before her death. Does her choice constitute befriending her brokenness, or the opposite?

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Fun quote: “One of the great guarantees of life is that every person, every couple, will suffer. When choosing a mate, **choose someone who suffers well** and you will never be sorry” (Kevin A. Thompson, “The Most Overlooked Characteristic of Who You Want to Marry,” familyshare.com).

¹ *Waiting for God*, in her essay “The Love of God and Affliction”, pp. 67ff.