

# Present — OVER — PERFECT

LEAVING BEHIND FRANTIC  
FOR A SIMPLER, MORE SOULFUL  
WAY OF LIVING

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WITH ASHLEY WIERSMA



## SESSION 1

# Pain Points



*It wasn't so long ago that we ourselves were stupid and stubborn, dupes of sin, ordered every which way by our glands, going around with a chip on our shoulder, hated and hating back. But when God, our kind and loving Savior God, stepped in, he saved us from all that.*

—Titus 3:3–5, *The Message*<sup>1</sup>

## THIS SESSION

*Have a group member read the following paragraphs aloud as a way to center everyone's thoughts on this session's topic.*

We're all pushing for something, for the life we think we want. We strive and strain and orchestrate and negotiate, in hopes of stitching together

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1. All Scriptures from *The Message*, unless otherwise noted.

an existence that satisfies, but in the end, all that forced movement, all that contrived exertion, leaves us writhing in pain, in agony, right inside the reality we ourselves created.

The pain shows up in addiction. Or in a string of failed relationships. It shows up in overeating, overdrinking, overspending, overfunctioning, over-*everything*. This is because that ideal life keeps eluding us, and so we keep pushing harder to pin it down, and when those efforts keep proving futile, we keep needing a way to soothe the ache. But it's an ache that can't be soothed from the outside-in; tending to such a throb is always an inside job.

"I loved my life, but I had become someone I didn't want to be around," Shauna Niequist wrote in *Present Over Perfect*, a reflection on the too-busy, too-much life she'd built. "I had become someone I didn't want to be," she said, a self-assessment that would sober anyone. But honest self-assessment was her only option, so high was the pain she'd endured for four straight years. It has been said that nobody changes unless the pain is great enough; if true, she was primed for great change.

Her experience offers an invitation to us: will we let our pain get to unreachable levels before we correct course and tend to our soul? Or, if the pain is already screaming, will we muster the courage to listen to it for once, and *change*?

Session 1 explores the inner battles we all face and emboldens us with the reminder that the selfish structures we've built can be rebuilt, the harmful systems we've shaped can be reshaped, and the fruitless deeds we've done can be redone. That is, if we're willing to change.

**“The things I had started off wanting—this life of meaning and depth and connection—was starting to be a life marked more by exhaustion, and loneliness, and isolation.” —Shauna**

## FIRST THOUGHTS

*Take a few minutes for your group members to share responses to the following question:*

When have you experienced a moment of clarity such as the one Shauna described, when you realized that the life you were living had to change, and that the change must happen not whenever you found time to get around to it, but *now*?

## VIDEO NOTES

*Play the video segment for session 1 and use the prompts below to log your thoughts and notes.*

A moment of realization

Pigpen's swirl of dirt and dust

Souls, and the tending they need

The ways we try to outrun our fear of facing the truth

“There’s no there there”

When the ER visit is nonnegotiable

## INVITING OTHERS IN

*Discuss as many of the following questions as time and group interest permit.*

1. Which of Shauna’s reflections, assessments, or ideas from this session’s video content resonated most with you, and why?
  
2. What emotions were stirred in you as you listened to Shauna describe her before-and-after moment in that Dallas hotel room, when she was desperate for her heavy, messy, disordered lifestyle

to change, and for the load she was carrying to be lightened somehow?

3. If you had to name the Pigpen-esque swirl of dirt, dust, and disorder that tends to follow you around, what would you call it? Constant drama, maybe, or chronic busyness? The drive toward perfectionism, perhaps, or the need to control? Why is it easier to acknowledge and name other people's swirls of dirt than to admit the one above our own head?
  
4. Shauna's Pigpen swirl manifested itself in daily life in two primary ways: First, it caused her to believe that she—as a highly capable, highly responsible woman, wife, mother, colleague, and friend—really could be everything everyone needed and do everything her heart desired. She referred to this as *pride*. Second, the swirl of disorder caused her to believe that gobbling up all life had to offer would somehow satisfy her soul. This was, to put it another way, *gluttony*.

How do you respond to Shauna's assertion that we all have a certain battle to fight, as it relates to our particular "besetting sins"

such as pride and gluttony, selfishness or gossip or rage? (See the box on the next page for more examples from Galatians 5.)

Have you ever sensed such a battle raging in your life? If so, describe for your group the dynamics involved.

**“The two sins at play here, I believe, are gluttony and pride—the desire to escape, and the desire to prove, respectively. I want to taste and experience absolutely everything, and I want to be perceived as wildly competent.”** —*Shauna*



“It is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time:

- repetitive, loveless, cheap sex;
- a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage;
- frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness;
- trinket gods;
- magic-show religion;
- paranoid loneliness;
- cutthroat competition;
- all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants;
- a brutal temper;
- an impotence to love or be loved;
- divided homes and divided lives;
- small-minded and lopsided pursuits;
- the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival;
- uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions;
- ugly parodies of community.”

—*Galatians 5:19–21*

5. When we realize that the life we have created for ourselves is a far cry from the life we dream of, the gap between the two, as depicted below, can cause us to despair. How will we ever get from here to there? How can we close the gap?



These questions can seem unanswerable, and in our frustration and a deep-seated sense of futility, we turn to buffers such as busyness, overworking, striving and straining, working out obsessively, shopping compulsively, using harmful drugs, overindulging in alcohol, engaging in illicit sex, blowing money on gambling, and more—all in an attempt to build that coveted bridge.

How have you seen this dynamic play out in your life? What did you hope your preferred buffers would provide for you, and how well were they able to deliver on the promises they made?

6. In the end, none of those buffers can sustain us, and so we tumble even farther into the chasm we were trying to bridge. Have a member of your group read aloud Romans 7:14–20. Describe a time in your life when, like the apostle Paul, you have done the very things you hadn't wanted to do, only to discover that, as Shauna's friend Glennon<sup>2</sup> says, "there is no there there."

**"The design flaw in all of it is thinking, 'If I do this, then I'll get this.'  
It's a faulty mechanism, all the way through." —Shauna**

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2. Glennon Doyle Melton writes about this idea in her book *Carry On, Warrior: The Power of Embracing Your Messy, Beautiful Life* (New York: Scribner, 2013).

## PRACTICING PRESENCE

*Have a group member read aloud the liturgy below, and then take turns responding to the question that follows.*

In this world, there will be challenge. There will be difficulty, and there will be pain.

We ought to know. We have been filled to overflowing with those things. This pain has looked like stuffing ourselves with experiences, with food, with fake intimacy, with stuff.

This pain has felt like a weight around our necks.

This pain? It has sounded like screaming, like desperation, like *let-me-out*.

It has smelled of fear.

It has tasted of regret.

This pain has left me hopeless, and yet isn't there always hope?

To be alive is to believe that hope beats alive still too.

My pain has been mine for so long, but it doesn't have to live here forever.

There is a life I crave, a pain-free, rage-free life.

There, I can connect in meaningful ways with people . . . living, breathing, blood-coursing-through-their-veins people. Imagine!

There, I can finally rest.

I can be enough there.

God *is* enough there.

If I work, I stay here. I get nothing.

But if God works, I go to the only there that *really is there*—the “there”  
of life that is truly life.

I wonder, Will I let him work in me?

Will I let myself go there?

Do you relate more to the “pain of here” portion of this liturgy, or to that which describes the “promise of there,” and why?

**“I had no idea how to get from here to there. But I knew that no matter what it cost me, I was going to find a way of living that was not marked by pushing, proving, earning, and competing.” —Shauna**

## SESSION 1

# Pain Points

## SOLO WORK



*Work through this section on your own, before you gather with your group for session 2.*

Of course, it is easier to keep buffering ourselves from the pain we feel than it is to address that pain head-on, to sit with it, to examine it, to understand it, to see it with soberness and clarity for what it is. But if we want change—real, lasting, useful, healthful change—then we will muster the courage and bravery it takes to raise our hand and say, “I’m in. Show me the burden I’ve been trying to carry in all its agonizing glory, so that *finally*, I can lay it down.”

The following three sections are designed to walk you through the process of assessing the breadth and depth and weight of your present pain, the pain associated with living anything less than a life marked by complete peace, sturdy faith, assured value, authentic connection, and real rest. Work through them at your own pace, taking as much time with each as you need.

**“The more I listen to myself, my body, my feelings, and the less I listen to the ‘should’ and ‘must’ and ‘to-do’ voices, the more I realize my body and spirit have been whispering all along, but I couldn’t hear them over the chaos and noise of the life I’d created. I was addicted to this chaos, but like any addiction, it was damaging to me.” —Shauna**

## REVIEW

Look back at the besetting sin you named in question 4 (pages 18–19) and jot it down again here:

Now, if you were to put words to that besetting sin, how would you define or describe it? What is it, and what is it not? How would a person know if she were struggling with it too, for example? Write out your thoughts below:

In your own life, how does this particular struggle hamstring you from living the way you desire to live? For Shauna, an example of *pride*

included wearing herself out to the point of sheer exhaustion, for the sake of preserving the reputation of being a super-capable person. Furthermore, as she wrote in *Present Over Perfect*, her health and overall well-being were crumbling:

My health was suffering. I was frequently sick. I slept poorly and not enough. I got migraines and then vertigo. The muscles in my neck and shoulders felt more like rock than tissue, and the circles under my eyes looked like bruises. My heart—the heart I used to offer so freely, the heart I used to wear proudly on my sleeve—had retreated deep inside my chest, wounded and seeking protection. My ability to taste and connect and feel deeply had been badly compromised. My faith was stilted—it had become over time yet another way to try and fail, rather than a respite or healing relationship. (page 16)

What are the telltale signs that *you're* being negatively impacted by sin? Below and on the next page, give as many concrete, practical examples as you can think of. If it helps you to order your thoughts, simply finish the prompt provided for each example you list.

**“One illustration of how this besetting sin has compromised my ability to be present, to enjoy life, to live simply, to thrive is . . .”**

*Example 1:*



*Example 2:*

*Example 3:*

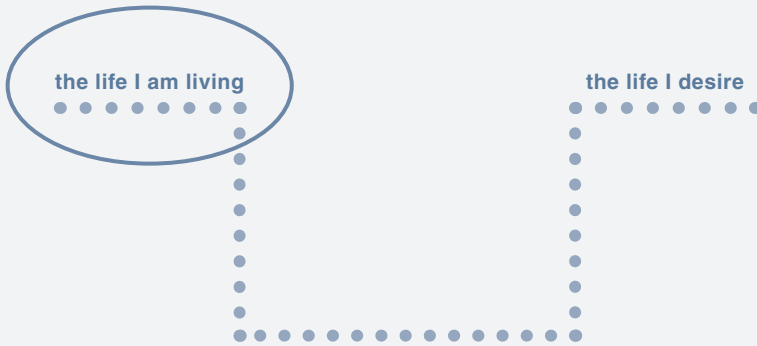
*Example 4:*

*Example 5:*

*Example 6:*

*Example 7:*

These examples you've acknowledged most likely converge to form a picture of the life you're working to escape from, the life on the left side of this chasm we looked at earlier:



We'll look at the right-hand side of the chasm—the life you desire—in a future session, but for now, how else would you describe the life you're living now, the one that may need an overhaul, a rebuilding, right from the ground up? Circle any of the adjectives below and on page 30 that apply to the characteristics you'd like to leave behind, adding to the list on the blanks provided, if you wish.

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|--------------------------|---------------|---------------|
| burdened                 | anxious       | joyless       |
| competitive              | tough         | cutthroat     |
| myopic/<br>hyper-focused | fearful       | lonely        |
| heavy                    | restless      | loveless      |
| efficient                | regretful     | isolated      |
| effective                | exhausted     | stuffed       |
| perfect                  | hard          | divided       |
| sad                      | proud         | hurried       |
| busy                     | single-minded | brutal        |
| stressful                | task-oriented | materialistic |
|                          | frenzied      | undisciplined |

overdisciplined	reactive	exasperating
impersonal	unchecked	frustrating
addictive	compulsive	flabby
friendless	erratic	productive
harried	hopeless	_____
ugly	scattered	_____
selfish	snippy	_____
hustling	disheveled	_____
multitasking	structured	_____
rage-filled	wearying	_____

If you were to distill your current life into one sentence, how would you articulate your present reality? What is most true about you, today? Put down your thoughts in the space below.

Before you rush to the next part, sit with what you've written for a few minutes. I know, I know: you don't have time to do that. Such is the curse of the overbusy. Still, here is your chance, your opportunity to look squarely in the face of the truth about you—how you're doing, who you've become, what is real—and see it for what it is. It's the truth, but only for today. Our truth changes as we change: Remember, this is only session 1!

And so, we're back to the sitting-with-truth. Review everything from this Solo Work section that appears in your handwriting. See the

words. Absorb the words. Let the realities they reflect hit you afresh. Turn on music, if you wish. Set a timer, if you must. But sit still. With your honesty, this honest look at your life.

In the blank space below, capture how you're feeling as you examine the pain you've endured—the pain you're perhaps enduring still. Draw a picture, pen a single word, print and paste a photo, sketch an emotion, copy a line from a song or a book, whatever. The goal here is intention, not perfection. Purposefully reflect what the pain elicits from you, as a way to mark this stage in your progress.

A large, empty rounded rectangular box with a blue border, intended for a drawing or reflection. The box is centered on the page and occupies most of the lower half of the page.

## RECEIVE

It is normal to look at our specific besetting sins and determine that they are heavier or more consequential than anyone else's setbacks and struggles. This makes sense; we tend to be harder on ourselves than we are on other people. But God doesn't seem to support this type of assessment. Sin separates us from him, regardless of what kind of sin it is, and what seems of utmost importance to God is not parsing the nature of our deviation as much as the distance that deviation creates. He wants us close! As long as we're clinging to our sin—and to the buffers we inevitably employ, in hopes of numbing the pain we experience as a result of it—our hands aren't free to hold on to him.

Read the following two passages of Scripture for proof that God is not looking for us to clean up our act before coming to him. He doesn't care how we come; he just cares that we do. The first one is from Romans 5:6–8:

Christ arrives right on time to make this happen. He didn't, and doesn't, wait for us to get ready. He presented himself for this sacrificial death when we were far too weak and rebellious to do anything to get ourselves ready. And even if we hadn't been so weak, we wouldn't have known what to do anyway. We can understand someone dying for a person worth dying for, and we can understand how someone good and noble could inspire us to selfless sacrifice. But God put his love on the line for us by offering his Son in sacrificial death while we were of no use whatever to him.

And then there is this one, from Titus 3:3–8:

It wasn't so long ago that we ourselves were stupid and stubborn, dupes of sin, ordered every which way by our glands, going around with a chip on our shoulder, hated and hating back. But when God, our kind and loving Savior God, stepped in, he saved us from all that. It was all his doing; we had nothing to do with it. He gave us a good bath, and we came out of it new people, washed inside and out by the Holy Spirit. Our Savior Jesus poured out new life so generously. God's gift has restored our relationship with him and given us back our lives. And there's more life to come—an eternity of life! You can count on this.

On the lines below, note a few findings from these Bible entries. Even if you've read these verses dozens of times, which words and phrases stand out to you this time around?

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- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

From the phrases you wrote above, put a check beside the one that feels most profound, relevant, or helpful to you here and now, based on

how things are going today. Now, turn that entry into the backbone of a prayer or confession by completing the sentences below.

Dear God,

Thank you for your Word, which is alive and active and sharper than a two-edged sword. Thank you for the wisdom it offers me for daily living, and for the power it has to help me see with fresh perspective insights that can keep me from stumbling along life's path. As I read these two passages, I am reminded that . . .

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What this tells me about you is that . . .

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As it relates to my struggle—my “besetting sin”—what this means for me is that . . .

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Please give me . . .

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as I walk through this process of peeling back the assumptions, expectations, experiences, relationships, attitudes, motivations, and habits that have led me to where I am today.

Knowing that the swirl of dirt over my head doesn't disqualify me from intimacy with you makes me feel . . .

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and realizing that in your presence, I can get back my life—real life, abundant life, the life I was created for all along—makes me feel . . .

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In a season of life when things can feel shaky, chaotic, and stuffed full, I receive your words as blessing, as shelter in a time of storm.

**“I offer you the same encouragement my mentor gave to me: Stop. Right now. Remake your life from the inside-out.”** —*Shauna*

## REMAKE

The rebuilding, the remaking, of a life doesn't happen in a quick, sweeping stroke of a magic wand that can instantaneously transform unrelenting freneticism into sanity, simplicity, and peace. No, more the case it happens by way of baby steps—and not always forward-moving ones, at that. “It can feel like two steps forward, three steps back,” Shauna reminds us, which is admittedly a seemingly impossible way to progress. The key here is that it's not always two-forward-three-back; *sometimes*, you'll catch a stride.

Think back on your journey thus far. When have you seen small-step



progress such as this firsthand? Maybe you picked up a new sport, or tried to learn how to play a musical instrument. You might have given a new language such as Spanish or Italian a try, or else perhaps you accepted a new role at work. Whatever the circumstances, there was a learning curve involved, and progress felt sluggish at best.

Describe the situation in the space below.

As it relates to reclaiming a sense of stability and beauty in your life, how willing are you to let progress be slow? To that end, consider incorporating the following handful of baby steps into your day today, and over the coming week. Read them over, give them a try, and dare to see what unfolds.

## **Baby Steps toward a More Soulful Way of Life**

- **Catch your breath.** (Literally.) Take a deep breath—in through your nose for a slow-count of four; out through your mouth for eight. If you’re feeling really ambitious, take *ten* breaths. Intentional breath-work is the sturdy base for a whole and healthy life.
- **Speak your besetting sin.** Say the words aloud: “I’m battling pride,” for example. Or, “I tend toward gluttony.” Or, “Some

days, anger consumes me.” Bringing the struggling into the light immediately disempowers and defangs it; everything’s scarier in the dark. Shine the bright beam of awareness by telling the truth, if only to God and yourself.

- **Keep the truth about you top-of-mind.** Remember: While you may be eager to take steps toward soulfulness, peacefulness, and a life that is marked by joy, your value as a human being is not contingent upon those changes being made. You are valuable here and now, today, with that dirt still swirling above your head. You were made on purpose, for a purpose. *You are already enough.*

A lined page follows, in case you want to log additional thoughts, observations, questions, ideas, or reminders, prior to your group convening for session 2.

# Notes

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