

Can God Bless You When You're in Pain?

We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope – Romans 5:3-4 (ESV)

A jovial rosy-cheeked young girl bounded across the set of a widely popular television talk show. Her proud mother and father made room for her on the sofa next to the show's host. They'd already been on for quite a while talking about their precocious youngster. Their description of her sounded much the same as any adoring parents yet their stories of normalcy were peppered with eerie tales of an uncommon disorder.

It's a rare disease, one most of the viewing audience might never have heard of until this moment – I certainly hadn't. But its effects couldn't be missed as the girl stepped from behind the curtain and into public view. Her chubby smiling face seemed a bit weathered. There were some bruises and scars, patches and bandaging.

Her right eye was covered and several gashes on her arms were dressed. Then, she smiled and her infectious grin revealed an endearing yet toothless grin. I felt my blood pressure rise as she walked across the stage. How could this much damage be done to a child?

My heart ached and pulse raced as I folded a pile full of clean laundry during the commercial break. My body was busy but my mind had slowed. I was consumed with thoughts and questions, eager to have each one of them answered. My internal conversation was interrupted when the commercial telling me I'd used the wrong detergent ended and the talk show host welcomed me back to the program. I sat down on the edge of my bed, my husband's crumpled t-shirt in hand, and

listened.

The parents explained.

Their daughter couldn't feel pain. They'd noticed it soon after her birth. A scraped knee on the playground or burnt tongue on a cup of hot soup would go unnoticed by her nerves – deadened and unresponsive. The news stunned her parents at first but gave them a sense of unexpected elation. Their daughter could never be hurt. She'd never feel pain. Seemed like a dream come true for a protective parent. This father and mother admitted to feeling blessed. Yet, their enthusiasm soon cascaded into a pool of despair.

First, some hot coffee spilled, burning their 3-month-old's baby soft skin. The overturned carafe leaked steadily from a coffee table but she didn't feel anything as her flesh scalded. Later, when she discovered the fun of using her hands, she began to pry at her eyes, freeing the one on the right from its socket.

When her teeth came in she began to unknowingly bite through her own lips and tongue, leaving her parents no other option than to have all of her teeth removed. Without the built in boundary that pain provides, there was no threshold that couldn't be crossed, no boundary that couldn't be broken and no need to request help instead of risking injury.

Tears streamed down this loving mother's face as she stroked her daughters blond hair. Above all else, she wished for her daughter the blessing of pain.

Job hated it and David despised it. Abraham hesitantly forged through it while Habakkuk tried to escape it. And you and I – we do the same.

We don't like pain.

Who does?

From the beginning of time humanity has gone to great measures to avoid the discomfort that accompanies the meeting of our bodies or souls with anything that causes hurt. Except for the occasional exercise poster exclaiming “No Pain, No Gain” the vast majority of our thinking is trained to steer clear of anything that will cause us discomfort. Pain is the arch-enemy of happiness, right? So, why – why – would any parent want it for their child? Wouldn’t life be better without it?

Maybe Hannah has the answer; her soul ripped and torn under the weight of a barren womb and the constant taunting of her rival. . .

. . she was greatly distressed and prayed to the Lord . . .- 1 Samuel 1:10

Or possibly Job, his heart frayed at the loss of his family and livelihood, his body sore from top to bottom with oozing boils. . .

. . .I had heard of Him but now my eyes have seen Him . . .- Job 42:5

Perhaps David’s poetic heart song can give us the hints we need . . .

.. .I would have despaired unless I believed . . .- Psalm 27:13

Or maybe Jeremiah, weeping and wailing, his heart and soul in deep anguish at the thought of the destruction of his beloved people and nation . . .

. . .there is a balm in Gilead . . .-Jeremiah 8:22

What about Stephen, his body snapping like a twig under the weight of the boulders being sent crashing down on his limbs . . .

. . .I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing. . .
– Acts 7:55

And of course there’s Paul and Silas; shackled to the walls of

a rusty Roman jail, backs freshly bruised from the beating and skin on their ankles blackened from tightly strung chains . . .

. . .about midnight [they] were praying and singing hymns of praise . . .Acts 16:25

Or maybe. . .just maybe. . . the message is just as clear; the mystery as easily unraveled when no words are spoken.

She never spoke.

The woman, painfully embarrassed and humiliated, having been caught by the Pharisees in the very act of adultery. She just looked into the soft, caring eyes of the One who didn't throw a stone (but had every right to) and heard:

. . .just go and sin no more . . .

She said nothing; just sat in the fresh wound caused by humiliation of the worst kind and listened. . .

. . .then left His presence brand new.

Mysteriously there seems to be a blessing in pain. It causes us to check the barometer of our activities and clearly see the reality of our circumstances. It forces us to seek refuge and protection, safe harbor and retreat. Pain is. . .well. . . painful. But ironically it is the gift that keeps us from further discomfort. When we feel it, it becomes a teacher pointing us to the only correct Answer there is.

And so, our Father, like any loving parent, desires for us the blessing of pain because, mysteriously, it keeps us, comforts us, humbles us, teaches us and drives us back to safety.

Hurting?

In spite of it all, bolster up the courage to see beyond.

Then whisper "thank you" to the One who loves you most.

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