

Help, God! It Hurts!

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Pain happens. In fact, it is likely that most of the folks reading this magazine are aware of pain in their own lives—either physical or emotional—at this very moment. Some are experiencing minor discomfort. Others feel devastated.

Pain is as mysterious as it is common. It knows no borders. It does not discriminate. It occurs in all classes and at all levels of society. It tends to increase with age. It is tolerated by most and understood by few.

The problem of physical pain costs America about \$55 billion in lost productivity in the marketplace annually. Moreover, literally tons of medications are ingested every day as well to relieve the hurts of our bodies.

Headaches, some almost totally debilitating, are experienced by 73 percent of our nation's population. More than 97 million of us will endure backaches to varying degrees in any given year.

Many people will attempt suicide because of their pain. Some will succeed.

Yet as great as the pain among us throbs at the physical level, it cannot be compared with the emotional pain being endured on the planet because of violence, war, divorce, grief, abuse, poverty, hopelessness and a plethora of other conditions. There is no instrument to measure the deep pain of unexplained depression that grips millions among us.

Books on the subject are everywhere. Some are written from the philosophical and religious view, such as C.S. Lewis' brief masterpiece, *The Problem of Pain*. Others have been written

from the medical and religious bent, as in the classic *Pain: The Gift Nobody Wants* by Paul Brand and Philip Yancey. (During a time of intense, prolonged pain, I found this volume more helpful than any book I had ever read except the Bible.)

Then there's Barbara Johnson, who writes about pain with godly humor. Her first book, *Pain Is Inevitable, Misery Is Optional, So Stick a Geranium in Your Hat and Be Happy*, packs a powerful wallop of hope in the midst of misery. She demonstrates that laughter really is to life what shock absorbers are to automobiles.

As much as we'd like to avoid it, pain is a part of the human experience. It's universal—and absolutely necessary.

Pain, My Roommate

I don't want this to be another 'Did I tell you about my operation?' story. But if I am to share the lessons I've learned about pain, we have to go through the operating room.

A few years ago I was ambushed by an unexpected illness while on a ministry trip. Believing myself to be in the peak of health, and active and energetic at age 55, I was astounded to find myself suddenly under the knife in open-heart surgery.

The first days following the operation were uneventful. My recovery seemed quite good, and a few days of rest were recommended by the doctors before the trip back home.

But then, just a couple of days into the recuperation period, I was stricken with unbearable, unrelenting pain. Re-admission into the hospital revealed the presence of a deadly staph infection located near my heart and vital organs. Another, more serious surgery was called for, and then another as the infection spread, threatening my life.

The third surgery left a gaping wound that required dressing three times a day—an enormously painful procedure. The muscles

in my chest were traumatized. There was no position in which I could find complete comfort or relief from pain.

The antibiotics had peculiar side effects, and the wound was a source of endless torture. Only powerful medications brought moments of relief. A month seemed to drag on for years.

Added to my physical pain was another torment: My wife had experienced an emotional breakdown and was admitted to the same hospital three floors below me. And there was a further complication: Trouble was rapidly brewing in the church my son and I pastored back home. Feelings of helplessness only deepened the pain my body was experiencing.

As my mind became clear enough to reason, I thought, *If I am going to be rooming with pain, I might as well learn all I can about this strange companion.* So for the next month, while a battle was being waged for my life, I studied pain from my own vantage point.

A View From the Front

Six observations about pain struck me in the midst of that battle.

First, *a part of the hurt of my pain was its unfathomable mystery.* “Why is this happening to me?” “What is the meaning of this?” “Has God forgotten about me?” These questions are not answered in the midst of pain.

If we seek our relief from pain through understanding it, then we likely will be hurting for a long time. Nice formulas, time-worn clichés and well-ordered expositions offer little help in this arena.

Why ask why? Our pain is sometimes complicated by our feverish attempts to comprehend something that is classified information with God. Frankly put, *why* is none of our business—and more than likely, we would not be helped if we

understood.

Second, *the discovery that I was not alone in my pain was an indispensable compensation.* Pain is powerful in its isolating potential. The sufferer seems, at least to himself or herself, to be all alone. This overpowering loneliness, even in the presence of visitors, serves to complicate and deepen the thrusts of pain's torment.

Third—and this goes hand-in-hand with the second observation—I noticed that *those who helped me most were those who had suffered the most.* Fellow travelers on the journey of pain spoke with a ring of integrity when they shared words of comfort. I was not interested in long messages of solace and support, but in countenances that seemed to say without words, “I know how you feel, and I care!”

Fourth, *I never quit or lost for long the exercise of praise.* I had written about it and preached about it; now the time had come for me to prove beyond any doubt the validity of the power of praise in the midst of trouble. If it could not work here, I knew it simply would not work.

Fifth, *I learned the art of living one moment at a time.* I never stopped praying for healing, but I did not make the prospect of its absence the basis for more misery.

As I faced the possibility that any moment might be my last, I savored every one of them. I could do nothing about the past and knew nothing about the future. Each moment was all the time I really had.

Sixth, *I never lost my God-given sense of humor.* When a pastor walked in one day, I greeted him with the declaration: “Well, here I am dying; my wife is downstairs going to pieces; my church is falling apart. What a time to praise the Lord!” We laughed together and prayed.

The Biblical Record

The Bible is not silent about pain. It traces the history of pain from Genesis to Revelation—literally from beginning to end.

From the place of my own pain, I noted what God said to Eve in Genesis 3:16: “I will greatly multiply your sorrow [pains in the NIV] and your conception; in pain you shall bring forth children” (NKJV). The history of man from that point forward has been a veritable catalog of pain, grief and sorrow.

I read about the pains of Job with fresh interest. I winced as God flung a plethora of unanswerable questions at Job, and I rejoiced with him as he acknowledged his own ignorance and immaturity to rise above the triumph.

I was encouraged to see that the final chapter of his life was greater than the first. Despite the fact that God had unstrung Job’s bow (Job 30:11), all was well in the end.

I traced the hand of God in David’s life as he moved from gloom to glory and from pain to praise. The psalmist was anchored by the knowledge that God “has not despised nor abhorred the afflictions of the afflicted; nor has He hidden His face” ().

Then, of course, there was the pain Jesus endured physically, emotionally and spiritually for our salvation. As a result, He now meets us in our suffering with a care known only to sufferers. It would take volumes to explore His pain alone.

Through the course of Bible history, then, pain plows its tortuous furrow until these words mark its demise: “There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away” (Rev. 21:4). So, in the Scripture, we see the beginning and the end of pain.

The Purpose of Pain

While pain will one day be a thing of the past, the Bible and

human experience make clear some of the purposes it serves for us today:

1. Pain protects. In the body, thousands of pain sensors sound the alarm in times of danger. Were it not for these guardians of our health, we would soon expire. As much as we loathe the hurt of pain, surely none of us would choose to end it as long as we are in these bodies.

Paul himself was riveted to a painful “thorn in the flesh” from which he apparently never gained relief. He stated that it was given to him for his own good, lest he should be “exalted above measure” (2 Cor. 12:7).

2. Pain detects. It is through pain that we are able to locate the problem. The first question a doctor is apt to ask is, “Where does it hurt?” The pain we feel will either tell us exactly where the trouble is or put us on the trail that will lead us there.

3. Pain corrects. The leper may walk incorrectly on a diseased foot until it is worn to the bone. Without the warnings of pain, no adaptations are called for, and thus the destruction is inevitable.

As the psalmist declared, speaking of the spiritual realm, “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word” (Ps. 119:67). Pain adequately communicated and properly responded to tends to bring on initiatives that result in healing. Pain denied, resisted or disregarded may lock the organism into a head-on collision with death.

4. Pain punishes. This may be the most questionable of pain’s designs, but it deserves mention. Much of our pain is our body getting back at us for denying it proper care and nourishment. But it should be remembered that the purpose of pain never stops at the punitive stage. It is always a call for change, for attention, for healing.

5. Pain instructs. Through pain we can be taught how to walk, behave, think and live our lives. It is our “menacing instructor” whose margins are very narrow. One of the most magnificently mysterious things ever said about Jesus was, “Though He was a Son, yet He *learned* obedience by the things which He suffered” (Heb. 5:8, italics added). If our Lord, though perfect, learned through sufferings, so may we expect to be properly instructed through pain.

6. Pain perfects. Pain in the human body serves in its protective and detective ministry to bring health. The same is true in the spiritual realm. Scripture informs us that the captain of our salvation, innocent and complete in Himself, was yet made perfect through sufferings (Heb. 2:10). So we are enjoined by Peter to suffer as Christ suffered, with the same attitude, because “he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin” (1 Pet. 4:1).

Again, we are reminded in Hebrews 12:11 that no discipline seems joyful, but painful; nevertheless, it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness. The fact is that pain, whether physical or emotional, may have a maturing effect on the sufferer.

7. Pain unifies. Any area of the body without pain sensors is incredibly isolated. The body soon loses touch with what it cannot feel and expends no effort to protect it. Lepers are known to perceive their diseased limbs as detestable dead weights.

On the other hand, pain reminds the body that it is one—every part cooperating with others and appreciated by them. Nothing so brings the entire body into unified action like the intrusion of pain. The mind, the nerves, the blood form a united front to fend off the enemy identified by pain’s alarm.

The lessons for the body of Christ here are obvious. The slightest pain in any part of the church body should marshal

all available resources for defense and healing.

The hurt in one member ought to arouse sympathy and action on the part of all other members. The health of one impacts the health of all.

In the scheme of human existence, each one of us experiences pain. And in the face of that pain—our beloved enemy, our magnificent menace—we laugh, we cry, we reason, we ask questions.

As much as we may want to, we dare not escape it entirely. Like a pulpit in the wilderness, pain is a place where we learn and grow.