



Pain

PAIN: PROBLEM, PUZZLE, PARABLE

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(2 Corinthians 12:9)

Pain, and the suffering it causes, is one of life's greatest problems. For all the amazing advances in medicine, pain still remains a significant puzzle. Although everyone has experienced pain, it is still difficult to precisely define and effectively treat. Economically, pain directly and indirectly costs America upwards of eighty billion dollars every year. An estimated ninety million Americans suffer and experience some level of disability due to chronic pain.

Spiritually, pain may also be considered a parable about living. It is a universal residue of the Fall, a reminder to every living person that the entire human race is under a curse. Pain was, in fact, a direct consequence of the sin of Adam and Eve. Women were cursed to bear children "in pain," and men were bound for "toil" and "sweat" to eke out an existence from the earth (Gen. 3:16-19). In contrast, the end of pain—God's promise to one day banish it forever—is a grand part of the glorious promise of heaven (Rev. 21:4).

For most, however, living with chronic pain is a major life problem. Not only is it a major medical and physical challenge, but it constantly assaults the mind and the spirit. Mentally, it is difficult not to obsessively focus and think about pain because its message to the nervous system is always demanding attention. Exhaustion, confusion, chronic fatigue, hopelessness, memory dysfunction, despair, suicidal thinking and planning, and distressed relations are all commonly associated with chronic pain.

Pain also assaults people's spiritual life, robbing them of spiritual vitality and motivation. Not only is it hard to pray and stay focused on God, often the pain sufferer simply doesn't want to be connected. For some, it's too much work. Others are angry with God and confused as to why He is not healing them. They struggle with

believing that God is good, or that He really cares for them personally. Chronic pain usually triggers a major challenge to faithful living and can easily shake the very foundations of people's beliefs.

GETTING ORIENTED TO PAIN MANAGEMENT

Psychiatrist Scott Peck begins his famous book, *The Road Less Traveled*, with the idea that life is difficult and full of trouble. People's refusal to accept this troublesome truth only magnifies the trouble we already live in. Likewise, accepting the fact of our chronically pained existence is essential. It will motivate us to act sufficiently and persevere long enough to control pain. It will also help us to live better with the pain that can't be controlled.

Accepting pain is not the same as resigning oneself to it and slipping into despair. Pain management requires that people accept the pain and map out a plan of action for dealing with it.

PAIN CONTROL STRATEGIES

There are literally dozens of strategies that have been developed to control and manage pain—cutting across medical, psychological, social, and spiritual domains. People in chronic pain can be helped by praying, reading and memorizing Scripture, being thankful for the good things in

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To Learn
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life, and being involved in worship, praise, and singing. They can occupy their minds with humor and laughter. Learning to see life's humor and laughing as much as possible can be a great release for people in pain. Starting or reviving a hobby, playing games, or doing puzzles can put their minds on other interesting activities. Group activities—whether a support group, joining a service club or helping ministry, doing counseling, or taking a class—also help put their focus elsewhere. Some are helped by writing—such as keeping a journal or writing letters. Most important, they need to stay hopeful, no matter what happens.

Methods to physically manage the pain include: pain medications, surgery, using a TENS unit (transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation), biofeedback training, relaxation training, retraining painful body movements, or massage therapy. Other ways to train their minds to manage pain include: pleasant imagery or music, calming self-talk, and thought retraining. People with chronic pain need to learn how to plan and pace their work, improve nutrition and exercise programs, and perhaps learn how to take strategic naps in order to help them function at their best.

THE GIFT OF PAIN

Years ago Philip Yancey and Paul Brand wrote a book destined to become a contemporary classic, *Pain: The Gift Nobody Wants*. In it, they talk about the tragedy of living life without pain, as did the lepers Dr. Brand worked with in India. Inability to feel pain usually leads to an early death or disability because the body has no mechanism to warn or fight against that which is dangerous to it.

This physical paradox is a metaphor for our spiritual and emotional life. The pain of a tweaked conscience can warn us

about evil dangers and moral trouble. Fear can sensitize us to risky people and situations, preparing us to flee or to fight. Pain, in truth, is a necessary part of healthy human existence.

Pain is also the impetus that attracts God to us in a special way. Pain motivates the Holy Spirit to reveal His comforting, nurturing, consoling, and protecting character—something that often comes to us by no other means but pain. Pain will truly teach that nothing will come between us and God (Rom. 8:31-39). Pain is the seed to growing a deep faith, to maturing in spiritual strength and wisdom, to becoming more and more like Christ (James 1:2-4; 1 Pet. 1:6, 7).

FURTHER MEDITATION:

Other passages to study about the issue of pain include:

- > Psalm 25:18
- > Jeremiah 29:11-13
- > Habakkuk 3:17-19
- > John 16:33
- > Romans 8:18, 31-39
- > 1 Peter 1:6, 7; 4:12-19

To Learn More: Turn to the key passage note on pain at Hebrews 4:14-16 on page 1624. See also the personality profile of the man at the pool of Bethesda on page 1378.



³⁰If I must boast, I will boast in the things which concern my infirmity. ³¹The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. ³²In Damascus the governor, under Aretas the king, was guarding the city of the Damascenes with a garrison, desiring to arrest me; ³³but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands.

And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:9

with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. ⁹And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

THE VISION OF PARADISE

12 It is doubtless^a not profitable for me to boast. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord: ²I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a one was caught up to the third heaven. ³And I know such a man—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—⁴how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. ⁵Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities. ⁶For though I might desire to boast, I will not be a fool; for I will speak the truth. But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be or hears from me.

THE THORN IN THE FLESH

⁷And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. ⁸Concerning this thing I pleaded

SIGNS OF AN APOSTLE

¹¹I have become a fool in boasting;⁴ you have compelled me. For I ought to have been commended by you; for in nothing was I behind the most eminent apostles, though I am nothing. ¹²Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you with all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds. ¹³For what is it in which you were inferior to other churches, except that I myself was not burdensome to you? Forgive me this wrong!

LOVE FOR THE CHURCH

¹⁴Now for the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be burdensome to you; for I do not seek yours, but you. For the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children. ¹⁵And I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved.

^{12:1} ^aNU-Text reads *necessary, though not profitable, to boast*. ^{12:11} ^aNU-Text omits *in boasting*.

SOUL NOTE



Perfecting Weakness (12:7-10) Pain doesn't have to be our enemy. Paul had experienced a great revelation from God (12:1-6). To keep him from being "exalted above measure," however, he had also been given "a thorn in the flesh."

Most likely this was some physical ailment that constantly afflicted him. Many people face chronic pain or physical afflictions. They may think that if God would heal them they would be much more valuable and effective in ministry. But God's power is often best revealed when He works through human weaknesses. His "strength is made perfect in weakness." **Topic: Pain**

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QUALIFICATIONS FOR HIGH PRIESTHOOD

5 For every high priest taken from among men is appointed for men in things *pertaining* to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins. ²He can have compassion on those who are ignorant and going astray, since he himself is also subject to weakness. ³Because of this he is required as for the people, so also for himself, to offer *sacrifices* for sins. ⁴And no man takes this honor to himself, but he who is called by God, just as Aaron was.

A PRIEST FOREVER

⁵So also Christ did not glorify Himself to become High Priest, *but it was He who said to Him:*

*"You are My Son,
Today I have begotten You."*^a

⁶As He also says in another place:

*"You are a priest forever
According to the order of Melchizedek";*^a

⁷who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear, ⁸though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. ⁹And having been perfected, He

5:5 ^aPsalms 2:7 5:6 ^aPsalms 110:4

KEY PASSAGE



Pain

COME BOLDLY

(4:14-16)

An amazing fact of the Christian faith is that the infinite God became a finite human being. Although without sin, Jesus Christ as a man experienced the weaknesses, temptations, pain, and difficulties of human existence. Thus, we have a Savior who can "sympathize with our weaknesses." He understands temptation, because He faced it. He understands weakness, because He experienced it. He understands pain, because He felt it.

People who live with chronic or acute physical or emotional pain have a Savior who truly understands. Far from sitting in the heavens simply feeling sorry for sick and sinful humanity, He clothed Himself with our humanness. When we come to Christ with our hurts, He reaches out with human arms, truly understanding how we feel. He is able to help us. Christ does not always take away the pain, but He does tell us to bring it to Him. Whatever our pain or difficulty, we are encouraged to "come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

To Learn More: Turn to the article about pain on pages 1534, 1535. See also the personality profile of the man at the pool of Bethesda on page 1378.

SOUL NOTE



Hidden Strength (4:14-16) Most people try to hide their weaknesses and failures. God knows all our weaknesses, however, and He sympathizes with them. Even more, He offers mercy and grace to help us. Christ understands because as a human being He experienced the challenges and temptations we face, "yet without sin." He knows that we are weak and need Him. He wants to give us the strength to endure our weaknesses and confront our temptations. We can "come boldly to the throne of grace," knowing that He wants to help us. **Topic: Weakness**

I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest! ³⁶And he who reaps receives wages, and gathers fruit for eternal life, that both he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together. ³⁷For in this the saying is true: 'One sows and another reaps.' ³⁸I sent you to reap that for which you have not labored; others have labored, and you have entered into their labors."

THE SAVIOR OF THE WORLD

³⁹And many of the Samaritans of that city believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified, "He told me all that I ever did." ⁴⁰So when the Samaritans had come to Him, they urged Him to stay with them; and He stayed there two days. ⁴¹And many more believed because of His own word.

⁴²Then they said to the woman, "Now we believe, not because of what you said, for we ourselves have heard *Him* and we know that this is indeed the Christ,^a the Savior of the world."

WELCOME AT GALILEE

⁴³Now after the two days He departed from there and went to Galilee. ⁴⁴For Jesus Himself testified that a prophet has no honor in his own country. ⁴⁵So when He came to Galilee, the Galileans received Him, having seen all the things He did in Jerusalem at the feast; for they also had gone to the feast.

A NOBLEMAN'S SON HEALED

⁴⁶So Jesus came again to Cana of Galilee where He had made the water wine. And there was a certain nobleman whose son was sick at Capernaum. ⁴⁷When he heard that Jesus had come out of Judea into Galilee, he went to Him and implored Him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death. ⁴⁸Then Jesus said to him, "Unless you *people* see signs and wonders, you will by no means believe."

⁴⁹The nobleman said to Him, "Sir, come down before my child dies!"

4:42 ^aNU-Text omits *the Christ*.



Pain

PERSONALITY PROFILE

THE MAN AT THE POOL: FREEDOM FROM PAIN

(JOHN 5:6)

People in pain will do almost anything to feel better. They use medicines and drugs to deaden pain. People who live with pain face the daily battle with an enemy that won't go away and won't let up. People in pain long to be released.

The man beside the pool of Bethesda had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. He lay with many other sick people beside this pool, waiting for a stirring of the waters that would enable a miraculous cure for the first person to enter the water. He longed to be freed, but his infirmity made it impossible for him to get to the moving water in time.

Then along came Jesus. Out of all the sick people around the pool, Jesus selected this man. He must have seen an attitude of faith in this man, and so Jesus approached him with the question, "Do you want to be made well?" And Jesus made him well—immediately and completely. The man who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years "took up his bed, and walked" (John 5:9).

Jesus has the power to heal any pain, but His first priority is to heal people spiritually. He may take away a person's pain, as He did this man's. Or He may not take away the pain, as He would not remove Paul's physical difficulty (2 Cor. 12:7-10). Whatever the Lord does, however, it's because He understands the big picture and knows what He can accomplish either through healing a person's pain or through giving that person grace and peace in spite of the pain. We can pray for healing, but most of all, we need to pray for spiritual growth and maturity, and that God will work through people's lives for His glory.

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