

The Purpose of Pain

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I've noticed a growing trend in our society marked by an aversion to pain. I suspect this trend is due to the easy availability of drugs that mask pain. It seems as if pain is another malady to be conquered by science, along with cancer and heart disease. But pain is not a disease. We forget that pain is a natural and helpful mechanism meant to inform us when something is wrong. We tend to not listen to our bodies and, thus, not listen to our pain. Pain is a symptom, not a problem. When we mask our pain, we stifle the messages our bodies are trying to give us. We need to learn to listen.

I don't intend to take on the drug companies or to convince you to not take pain medications. Instead, I want to explore the workings of pain in our lives and what we can learn from it. I believe pain can be our teacher.

Learning from Pain

At its most basic level, pain is a warning. It triggers when we touch something hot or when we injure ourselves. We feel pain when something is wrong inside us, such as a stomachache or headache. From the pain messages, we learn what behaviors to avoid, such as not touching the hot stovetop. We also learn new behaviors, such as wearing sunglasses when spending hours in the bright sun. If pain is repetitive, then we need to change our behaviors to mitigate the pain, such as not eating foods that give us heartburn. Listen to the messages your body is giving you and try to learn from them.

These principles also apply to emotional pain. Can we learn from our pain to change our behaviors so we aren't inflicting pain on ourselves or allowing others to inflict pain on us? What is your pain telling you? If you're experiencing emotional pain, you'll be tempted to mask or medicate it. But sit with it long enough to understand it and to learn what you need to do to remedy it. If you medicate your pain, then you're only treating the symptom and remain in the dark as to its cause. Seek to understand its cause so you can correct it.

Transformed by Pain

In my book, *Four in the Garden*, Creator said, “The soul attains full maturation when transformed by life of which pain is an integral component.” Pain has value if we allow it to transform us. Pain has spiritual purpose. The apostle, Paul, understood this and sought to partake in Christ’s sufferings as a way to know Christ better and to become more like Him. “I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.” (Philippians 3:10). I admit this concept is far beyond me, but I recognize that Paul’s attitude toward suffering is rare when compared to the importance placed on minimizing pain these days. This is evident in advertisements that promote weight loss or great abs without exercising. What happened to “no pain, no gain?”

Paul believed that suffering had the power to raise us to a higher spiritual state. “For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” (2 Corinthians 4:17). This power isn’t found in the suffering itself, but in God’s ability to use the suffering to our benefit when we trust Him to do so. God can only transform what we hand over to Him. During my back injury, I believed there was some spiritual purpose in it, although I couldn’t see it at the time. Nevertheless, I trusted God during that dark time and entrusted my body and soul to Him, believing He could use the situation to bring about spiritual growth in me. Had I not done so, I doubt I would have learned or grown as much as I had.

Paul saw benefits to suffering. “Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.” (Romans 5:3-4). Paul lists three areas that can develop from suffering: perseverance, character, and hope. Learning to endure pain develops perseverance that helps us stick it out during long or tough challenges in life. Perseverance produces character that is more focused on others than on our own comfort. And character leads to

hope that, in this context, means an abiding trust in God during times of trial where reward and gratification are delayed, but still believed in.

God's Intention

If, during our suffering, we focus on our misery and complain, I believe we can sabotage God's intention to use it to transform us. Even of Jesus, it is said that He was made perfect through suffering (Hebrews 2:10). If Jesus, our example, needed to suffer to be made perfect, then much more do we need to be perfected through life's experiences. An attitude of trust is important. Can you entrust your painful circumstances to God so He can use it to deepen your character? Our transformation has paramount importance to God, more than our comfort. Our bodies and circumstances don't last forever, but our souls do, so God is invested in developing our souls, making them ready for eternity.

I believe we will continue to grow in the next life, but this life is about developing an elasticity and humility that fosters the greatest capacity for future growth. Through life's experiences, we can develop a spiritual capacity for partaking in God's abundant and overflowing Life and Spirit. Without the necessary transformation to our souls, we won't be able to contain the immensity of such abundance and Presence.

Benefits of Pain

One lesson I learned from pain is a deeper acceptance and trust. It's natural to resist pain and discomfort. I resisted the thought that I would be permanently disabled. But God was saying to me, "What if you don't get better? Will you trust Me anyway?" I wrestled with that question for some time. In the end, the question boiled down to, "Is God trustworthy or not?" I decided He was trustworthy and would be no less able to care for me if I were permanently disabled. What helped me was meeting a lady named Marcy ten years earlier. When I met her, she was still confined to bed because of a back

injury five years prior. She radiated joy and gratitude in spite of her disability and had tremendous trust in God.

Another lesson I learned during that time was to live in the present moment. During my injury, I kept dreading the future, seeing it as an unmanageable burden. I also looked back at the many months of immobility and debt, and got depressed about the unproductive time of being confined to bed and not making income. God taught me to focus on Him in the moment and to not dwell on the past or future. He reminded me that He doesn't inhabit the past or future. Those things are abstract and have no present reality. But God dwells in the present and we can experience Him there. When we focus on the past or future, we sever our active connection to God because we jump into our minds to obsess on past events or future worries.

One surprising benefit I discovered was that focusing on the present moment made my pain more manageable. The thought of an entire day of pain was crushing, but I found I could manage the current moment of pain I was experiencing. And I would manage the next moment of pain, and then the next. I didn't worry about how I would get through the day or week or month. Instead, I stayed in the moment and managed that moment. This is a great way to tackle life when it feels overwhelming. Also, it keeps us centered on God who inhabits the present moment and makes Himself available to us in that moment.

Character and Maturity

Today's society is accustomed to instant gratification. I worry that we are losing the virtues of sacrifice, denial, and delayed gratification. During World War II, when rationing was enacted, the entire country made voluntary sacrifices to support the war effort. The Great Depression and World War II taught my parents how to make sacrifices and to live on less. I see how those instilled values created an incredible generosity in my parents. Pain and

suffering can do the same for us. Pain can teach us humility, endurance, willingness to suffer for others, and gratitude for what we have.

James encourages us be grateful for our trials. “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” (James 1:2-4). Our reason for joy is that when we persevere, it produces a complete maturity that Paul defines as “attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” (Ephesians 4:13). And that is God’s intention for our transformation, that we be filled with the fullness of God and, thus, bear His image in all its glory.

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