

Pain

Unwrapping the Perfect Gifts – Part III

Romans 5:3-4

Introduction

For a number of years, it has been my custom to take care of “bath time” with my children. Of course, I am down to my youngest child – little Charity. It will not be long before she will not want me in the bathroom playing games such as “I Spy” and “Guess the Bottle” (a game that we created).

A few nights ago, I was reading to Charity from one of her school books. While reading, I discovered the meaning behind the interesting phrase, “white elephant”. According to the legend, a particular king, who lived in India, had a unique way of dealing with a difficult person who was a member of his court. The king would give the obnoxious person a very special present . . . a rare white elephant (a real one!). Now, this seemed like a great honor, and the king acted as if it was, but, in reality, it was punishment. The reason for that is because a white elephant was considered so special that it could not be used for work. As a result, it just ate and ate and ate, and, in general, got in the way of life! Also, the recipient of this “special gift” usually went bankrupt just trying to feed and care for the elephant. Since it was a personal present from the king, the owner could not even think about giving it away. So, he was stuck, literally, with a white elephant!

I guess the moral of the story is to never accept a white elephant from your boss! Even though it is rare, always refuse the elephant!

Haven’t you, in the past, received a gift from someone that you really did not want? You knew, as soon as you opened it, that you were going to give it away to some distant relative the next year!

Our church staff has, for several years at our Christmas party, enjoyed playing the white elephant game. You know how it is played . . . everyone brings a gift they really do not want and then, everyone takes turns choosing a gift, opening it, and if they do not like it, trading it with someone else’s gift. You have only one chance to trade away your gift, so eventually, the worst gifts remain in some unfortunate person’s possession, while the best gifts, which are few and far between, become the prized possession of the fortunate few.

Our staff developed a tradition where one of the gifts, the least desired of all, is a coconut that is shaped to look like the head of a hog and painted with gaudy paint. It shows up every year! As soon as that pig’s head appears, we know that someone is going to be greatly disappointed. We all laugh and laugh at the poor person who gets the pig’s head. Our Christmas parties draw us so much closer together!

When you became a believer, whether you knew it or not, you became the recipient of a number of gifts. These are perfect gifts that you will enjoy unwrapping throughout the course of your Christian experience. The good news is that there are no pig’s heads or rare white elephants anywhere in sight.

The apostle Paul has been working his way through a list of perfect gifts from God. The first one is peace and the second one is grace.

Pain – A Perfect Gift From God Alone

As we move through the list, we discover that the third perfect gift from God is a surprising gift that surely landed on the wrong list. It is the gift of pain.

If you are like me, you immediately take a second glance at the text. Surely Paul is not relating trouble and suffering and affliction to gifts like peace and grace . . . but, he is.

Notice what Paul wrote in Romans, chapter 5, verses 1 through 3a.

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult [triumphantly praise] in hope of the glory of God. And not only this, but we also exult [triumphantly praise] in our tribulations . . .

There it is. Not only does Paul energetically and enthusiastically praise God for grace, but he energetically and triumphantly praises God for trouble (which is the Greek word “thlipsis,” meaning, “pressure, suffering . . . pain”).

Is Paul having a moment of apostolic insanity? He is praising God for pain!?

I have never yet been to a prayer meeting where someone said, “You know, I’ve been having a lot of problems lately, and I just want to thank God for ‘em.”

I have never heard anyone say, “There’s a lot of pressure in my life right now and nothing’s working out and I’m just praising God about it! Thank you, Jesus!”

Let’s face it, you have never sung a song from the hymnal that went something like:

*Thank you Lord for all of my troubles,
Thank you Lord that things never work out;
Thank you Lord for giving me problems,
I’m thanking You now as my world falls apart.*

I made that up this past week, in honor of our study. Hold your applause!

If you sing that song, the average prayer meeting will disband in disbelief. We may not sing it, but the truth remains that we all struggle with praising God for the gift of pain.

Comments on physical pain

Before we get to our text, I want to say a couple things about pain in general. I will start with physical pain.

Physical pain is an inevitable part of life

1. First, physical pain is an inevitable, unavoidable part of life.

Nearly two hundred years ago, Thomas Jefferson wrote a letter to a friend. In it, he said, “The art of life is the avoiding of pain. That may sound good, but I would disagree.”ⁱ

The art of life is not avoiding pain; the art of life is learning how to respond to pain. The experience of living has everything to do with how you live through the experience.

The truth is, and please follow me closely in this, every one of us not only experiences pain in life, but we actually began life in pain. Listen to one author’s description of that event.

Your world is dark, safe, secure. You are bathed in a warm liquid, cushioned from shock. You do nothing for yourself; you are fed automatically, and a murmuring heartbeat assures you that someone larger than you fills all your needs. Your life consists of simple waiting – you’re not sure what to wait for, but any change seems far away. You meet with no [discomfort], no threatening adventures. [Ah], it’s a fine [life]. One day you feel a tug. The walls [seem to be] falling in on you. Those soft cushions are now pulsating and beating against you, crushing you downwards. Your body is bent in half, your limbs twisted and wrenched. You’re falling, upside down. For the first time in your life, you feel pain. You’re in a sea of roiling matter. There is more pressure, almost too intense to bear. Your head is squeezed nearly flat, and you are pushed harder, harder...oh the pain, the noise, the pressure. You hurt all over. You hear the sounds of screams and crying and groaning, and an awful fear rushes in on you. It is happening – your world is collapsing. You’re sure it’s the end of whatever there is. You see a piercing, blinding light. Cold rough hands pull at you; then a painful slap. Congratulations . . . you’ve just been born.ⁱⁱ

Welcome to the world! That first experience in life delivered a message to every one of us – pain is an unavoidable part of living.

Physical pain is an essential part of life

2. Secondly, physical pain is not only unavoidable, it is an essential part of life.

Many people believe that pain is God's one mistake. The nervous system, with its millions of pain sensors, always gets "bad press". If God is so wise, why didn't He create us with a built in ability to never feel pain?

Dr. Paul Brand revealed the gift of pain in his lifelong work with people who suffer from Hansen's disease. We know this disease by another name – leprosy.

While the word "leprosy" conjures images in our minds, of stubby fingers, ulcerated wounds, missing legs, and distorted facial features, in actuality, leprosy is not the direct reason for those visible effects.

Hansen's disease slowly destroys its victims simply because they do not feel pain; they have a defective pain system. The disease primarily acts as an anesthetic which numbs the pain cells of hands, feet, nose, ears, and eyes. While most diseases are feared because of their pain, Hansen's disease is deadly because its victims feel no pain. The destruction of fingers, eyes, feet, and other limbs follows simply because the warning system of pain is gone.

For instance, in villages in Africa and Asia, where Dr. Brand has worked, a leper will reach directly into a fire to retrieve a dropped potato. Nothing in his body told him not to. Patients at Dr. Brand's hospital in India would work all day gripping a shovel with a protruding nail, or they would extinguish a burning wick with their bare hands or walk on splintered glass.

Patients can slowly go blind, only because their eyes never felt the discomfort that causes the rest of us to blink. A patient will turn an ankle, tearing tendon and muscle, but simply adjust and walk with a crooked leg, until the rest of his leg is ruined and infected.

No wonder Dr. Brand once said, "Thank God for inventing pain."ⁱⁱⁱ

Now, not all pain is good. Sometimes the flaring up of pain communicates something that cannot be repaired or fixed. It becomes something to endure and suffer through. However, for the majority of cases, pain is God's warning signal, and without it, none of us would survive very long.

Comments on pain of the soul

Paul reveals in Romans, chapter 5, that just as physical pain is inevitable and essential, another type of pain is as well.

Pain of the soul is an inevitable part of life

1. Paul reveals that suffering, pressure, and the pain of adversity in life is also inevitable.

Notice that Paul did not say, in verse 3a, "And not only this, but we also exult *if* tribulations come . . .".

No, Paul wrote,

And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations . . .

In other words, Paul assumed tribulations would come!

Peter said a similar thing when he wrote, in I Peter, chapter 4, verses 12 and 13,

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, . . .

(What did Christ suffer? Rejection, abandonment, misunderstanding, ridicule, beatings, indignities, and martyrdom!)

. . . keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation.

Peter uses the same word that Paul used, "exult," meaning to fervently praise your way through times of suffering.

After researching this subject, reading from twenty-three different books, in addition to *the Book*, God's Word, I believe I can summarize the trials of life into six categories:

- things I want to experience, do not happen;
- things I do not want to experience, happen;
- things I like, I do not get;
- things I do not like, I get;
- things I am waiting for, never come;
- things I am not ready for, come early.

Surely these are things that God would never want us to endure. The gifts of adversity and

affliction and pain are white elephant gifts. We do not want them, but they are given to us by an angry God, or they are allowed to happen by a weak God. Surely a powerful God would only design wonderful things for us.

Solomon wrote it this way, in Ecclesiastes, chapter 7, verses 13 and 14a,

Consider the work of God, for who is able to straighten what He has bent? In the day of prosperity be happy, but in the day of adversity, consider, God has made the one day as well as the other . . .

That verse is probably the most ignored verse in twenty-first century Christianity. Everyone seems convinced that God wants to bring days of prosperity and blessing; that surely God would not bring days of adversity.

Solomon wrote it, however! God not only creates the days of prosperity, He also creates the days of adversity.

What do you say to the accident victim? What do you say to the believer who suffers a crippling illness? What do you say to someone standing next to a grave or at the scene of a violent crime? Why doesn't someone admit that life is a war zone with real battles and real bullets and real blood. There is sickness and heartache and disappointment. There are crippling accidents and crushing experiences and tears and death.^{iv}

Wouldn't you like to hear from someone who is like the apostle Paul in not only wanting to know about the power of the resurrection, but the fellowship of Christ's sufferings as well? What would that person say?

Well, to begin with, they would say that tribulation and affliction are inevitable. They would say:

- things you want to experience, do not happen;
- things you do not want to experience, happen;
- things you like, you do not get;
- things you do not like, you get;
- things you are waiting for, never come;
- things you are not ready for, come early!

If you are still not convinced that adversity and pain are inevitable to the believer, listen to this verse in Philippians, chapter 1, verse 29,

For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake

People today say,

All suffering is wrong . . . all who suffer are out of the will of God . . . if you suffer, you are in sin . . . if you don't have prosperity, you evidently don't have faith.^v

Listen to a great man of faith record in his diary, in II Corinthians, chapter 4, verses 8 through 9, and I quote,

we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed

That is what I call, overcoming the adversities of life.

You might write a word in the margin of your Bible at Romans, chapter 5, verse 3. The word Paul used that is translated "tribulation" is a word that referred to olives being squeezed in the press or grapes being crushed for their juice. So, you could accurately write the word "pressure" or "pain" in the place of "tribulation".

Paul writes the shocking testimony in verse 3,

And not only this, but we also exult [triumphantly praise in the midst of] our tribulations . . .

In other words, Paul is saying to every believer, "Times of painful pressure and tribulation are an inevitable part of every believer's life . . . but you can exult, fervently praise God, as you go through the squeeze of life."

How?

Pain of the soul is an essential part of life

2. That brings us to the second truth that tribulation is not only inevitable, it is essential. Like physical pain, which is both inevitable and essential, so the pain of the soul – the pressure on our emotions and the stress of life in general – is both inevitable and essential.

Ways in which God uses pain

According to the Bible, God uses pain, or tribulation, in two ways. Let me give them to you.

God uses pain to correct us

1. First, God uses tribulation to correct us.

David wrote in Psalm, chapter 119, verses 67, 71, and 75,

Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word. . . . It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes. . . . I know, O Lord, that Your judgments are righteous, and that in faithfulness You have afflicted me.

Like a parent disciplines their child, causing pain on their hand or their bottom to keep them from even greater pain from a hot stove or traffic in the street, so the Lord uses painful ordeals to arrest our attention and protect us from greater harm.

God uses pain to construct us

2. Secondly, God not only uses tribulation to correct us, but also to construct us.

That is the nuance of Paul's approach to tribulation in chapter 5 of Romans. Notice what he goes on to write in verse 3.

And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance;

Paul has been talking about justification, and what justification does for us. Now he talks about what tribulation does in us.

Pain produces perseverance

- Pain produces perseverance.

Justification gives us peace, but it does not make us patient. Justification gives us grace, but it does not make us godly. Justification is the foundation, but Paul now talks about the construction of the believer's life, with the foreman on the construction site being tribulation.

Most of us think that when we give our lives to God, He will remodel us. We think He will change the wallpaper or the paint; that He will pull up the carpet and refinish the floors.

No, no, no. God does not watch the show, *Trading Spaces*. He does not remodel one room; He tears the whole house down and starts all over. He does not put up a new light fixture that looks like it came out of someone's barn; He rewires everything. He does not work for just forty-eight hours; He is at

work as long as you are alive. And, He has promised that what He began in you, He will complete.

Pain produces perseverance.

Pain produces purity

- Secondly, perseverance produces purity.

Continue in Romans, chapter 5, to verse 4a, where Paul tells us,

and perseverance [brings about], proven character; . . .

The idea in this verse is of character that is devoid of impurities.

The word "character" carries with it the idea of an ancient goldsmith who refines the crude gold ore in his crucible. The only way to separate the gold from unwanted material is to reduce the ore to liquid form, through intense heat. The impurities rise to the surface and are skimmed off. He continues to add more and more heat to the liquid gold until the impurities are all skimmed off the surface. When the goldsmith can see his reflection mirrored in the surface of the liquid, he knows that the contents are pure gold.^{vi}

God, the divine Goldsmith is refining us; separating from our lives unwanted material. Through pain, He purifies us. Job said, in chapter 23, verse 10,

. . . He knows the way that I take; when He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold.

Imagine, if God is desiring to see His reflection in our character, then perhaps the heat is still intense in some area of our lives simply because He has yet to see His reflection!

Pain produces perspective

- Tribulation produces perseverance; perseverance produces purity, and finally, purity produces perspective.

Paul writes in the last part of verse 4,

and proven character [produces], hope

We could call this, eternal perspective.

God does not promise to remove our pain, or even to relieve our pain, but He does promise to transform our pain and use it to construct lives that are marked by perseverance, purity, and perspective.

Our perspective, however, has to go beyond our lives . . . and into eternity. That was what gave Peter

hope and joy. Listen as he writes, in I Peter, chapter 1, verses 6 and 7,

In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being much more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ

In other words, God has promised to set things right in the end.

Let history finish! Let it finish! While you wait, give God glory. While you suffer, honor Him. While you receive that which you do not want and do not receive what you do want, glory in Him alone. History is not finished yet, so let it finish!

Conclusion

Paul goes on to say in Romans, chapter 5, verse 5a,

and hope does not disappoint . . .

How many times have you said, "I had hoped . . ."? You may have said:

- I had hoped in that cure.
- I had hoped in that person.
- I had hoped in that interview.
- I had hoped in that election.
- I had hoped in that purchase.
- I had hoped in that child.
- I had hoped in that friend.
- I had hoped in that investment.
- I had hoped . . .!

Paul says that hope in God will never be disappointed. So why do you hope in everything else, while He waits for you to hope in Him?

In the end, Jesus Christ, will ride on the wind to end the history of this suffering world and set all things right. He said Himself, in the last book of this Bible, in Revelation, chapter 2, verse 25,

. . . [the truth] that you have, hold fast until I come.

How do you hold fast the truth? I will tell you how. You hold fast the truth by accepting the gift of pain, with its correction and its construction. When you accept this gift from God, and surrender to it, you will find open to you, the way of honor and glory and praise, like never before.

We have a lot of hymns in our church hymnal that were written by Fannie Crosby, a blind poet. When she was only six weeks old, she developed a minor eye inflammation and the doctor's careless treatment left her blind. She would later write, "It seemed intended by the blessed providence of God that I should be blind all my life and I thank Him for it."

She would also write that her blindness was God's gift to her so that she could write songs for His glory. She would go on to write hundreds of hymns including: *Face to Face, To God be the Glory, Blessed Assurance, All the Way My Savior Leads Me.*

Fannie Crosby wrote her first poem when she was eight years of age. Listen to the way in which, even then, she expressed praise and glory to God,

*Oh what a happy child I am,
Although I cannot see!
I am resolved that in this world,
Contented I will be.
How many blessings I enjoy
That other people don't!
So weep or sigh because I'm blind,
I cannot, and I won't.^{vii}*

That is what I call accepting the gift of pain.

How are you suffering today, my friend? Where is the pain, the pressure, the squeeze in your life? Have you ever considered the fact that God is at work through that?

Will you accept it . . . surrender to it . . . allow it . . . ask God to use it to transform your mind and heart so that you reflect the mind and heart of your heavenly Father, in whom your hope will never be disappointed?

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- ⁱ Warren Wiersbe, The Bumps Are What You Climb On (Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Book House, 1980), p. 59.
- ⁱⁱ Philip Yancey, Where Is God When It Hurts (Harper Paperbacks, 1990), p. 203.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., pp. 14, 23, 24.
- ^{iv} Charles Swindoll, A Ministry Anyone Could Trust (Insight For Living Study Guide, 1989), p. 56.
- ^v Charles Swindoll, Stress Fractures (Portland, OR, Multnomah, 1990), p. 55.
- ^{vi} Kenneth Wuest, Bypaths in the Greek New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1954), p. 73.
- ^{vii} Warren Wiersbe, Victorious Christians You Should Know (Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Book House, 1984), p. 23.