

Pain: The Problem and the Promise

by J. W. Jepson

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What parents would name their child "Pain"?

Not "Payne." *Pain*.

"It's time to get up, Pain."

"Pain, breakfast is ready."

"You can go out and play with your friends now, Pain."

"Hey, guys, here comes Pain. He can play shortstop."

What a name to hang on a child! Imagine growing up with a name like that. Think what it would do to your self-image.

Strange as it might seem, that is what one mother actually named her son. As we plod through a list of ancient Israelite names in 1 Chronicles, Chapter Four, suddenly the Scriptures zoom in on one home, one person. Here is the cameo.

"Jabez was more honorable than his brothers. His mother named him Jabez, saying, 'I gave birth to him in pain'. Jabez cried out to the God of Israel, 'Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain'. And God granted his request" (Verses 9, 10 NIV).

Jabez means "pain." Though the Bible does not give us the story of his life, we sense in his prayer a life-purpose to rise above his name — a purpose that drove him to call on the true and living God. And God answered his prayer.

Though not in the same way that Jabez did, we all deal somehow and in some measure with the problem of pain.

Yes, God created us with the ability to sense pain. A certain amount of pain is necessary for our safety and survival. Imagine what life would be like without the physical sensation of pain. Daily contacts with our environment would be filled with deadly danger. You might put your hand on a red-hot burner and never feel it. Only when you smelled your own flesh frying would you remove your hand. Then it would be too late.

But God did not create us to suffer. Severe pain is the result of the fall of Adam. The classic passage in the Bible on this subject is Romans 8:18 - 23.

"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits eagerly for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

"We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (NIV).

Because of sin, God had to limit the human life span. Humanity could not be allowed unlimited opportunity on earth to progress in sin. Thus we have the curse — the universal process of deterioration, pain and death.

Science is working to help extend the telomeres of our chromosomes and thus maximize our divinely set biological potential of 120 years (Genesis 6:3). Nevertheless, death is an ultimate certainty. "Man is destined to die" (Hebrews 9:27 NIV).

Like others, believers live in bodies that are part of the present deteriorating physical order. Only our resurrection will occasion the release of the whole waiting creation from its bondage to decay. That is why the righteous also suffer pain. It is part of our physical *status quo*.

God said to Eve, our first mother, "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children" (Genesis 3:16 NIV). The Bible often uses childbearing as the example of severe suffering. Thus it has been for most of human history. We are thankful for modern methods of reducing and relieving pain!

Pain is a common experience of all creatures who have the biology and anatomy to sense it. This includes human beings. Job acknowledged that. Speaking of all mankind, he said: "But his flesh upon him shall have pain, and his soul within him shall mourn" (Job 22:14 KJV).

Pain is not a proof of personal sin, as Job's comforters alleged. Jeremiah, a righteous man, cried out, "Why is my pain unending?" (Jeremiah 15:18). Perhaps you also have asked that question.

Elihu said to Job, "Man is also chastened with pain" (Job 33:19 NASB). Pain can be a form of the Father's chastisement of believers. Quoting Proverbs 3:11, 12, Hebrews 12:6 informs us that God disciplines the ones He loves and scourges His redeemed children (has God ever taken you "to the woodshed?").

Severe pain will be a judgment on people who refuse to repent. In Revelation 16:10, 11 we view this apocalyptic scene: "And the fifth angel poured out his vial upon the seat of the beast; and his kingdom was full of darkness; and they gnawed their tongues for pain, and blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, and repented not of their deeds" (KJV).

Blaming God for the suffering in the world is a common response of the impenitent. Genuine repentance includes abandoning all charges against Almighty God, the righteous and just One.

So what about Christians? What should be the attitude of believers regarding pain, chronic pain and particularly intense pain?

First, we must realize that pain itself is an intrinsic evil. Pain is not a virtue. In itself pain earns no merit. Yes, God can use our sufferings for a greater purpose. Our sufferings can be an occasion and an opportunity for God to do a work of grace in us, strengthen us, and build our character through patience in our suffering. Also, how we handle pain and suffering can be a positive testimony to others, especially unbelievers. Nevertheless, pain *per se* is an enemy; it is part of the present "groaning" of the creation.

Second, instead of merely "toughing it out," people who are suffering pain should seek to relieve it as much as reasonably possible by taking advantage of available pain management and pain relieving resources.

Also, we can and should take hold by faith of God's promises to heal and restore health. This means coming to Him in faith and asking Him specifically for healing. James 5:14 instructs us, "Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord" (NIV). The next verse assures us that the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well, and the Lord shall raise him (or her) up.

For times of inescapable and unrelievable pain, God has promised and provided His all-sufficient grace and strength. Suicide is *not* an option.

Martyrs of all ages have borne extreme pain by God's sustaining grace. They have been burned alive, torn apart, "stoned, sawn in two" (Hebrews 11:37), or otherwise tortured to death, and have come through it victorious by faith.

Other believers have bravely fought and won their own personal war with pain. They honored the sanctity of human life, including their own. Theirs was a true death with dignity.

The Lord assured Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9 NIV). That assurance has sustained believers down through the centuries. It continues to do so now.

Although pain is not in itself a virtue, patience is and patience will have its reward. Holding steadfast under adversity of all kinds develops in believers the permanent character qualities that will make us what we are becoming and shall be forever.

Unbelievers watch how Christians handle adversity, including pain and suffering. So, let Christ be exalted in our bodies, "whether it be by life, or by death" (Philippians 1:20).

Now, what about the future? Is the creation, including humanity, doomed to perpetual pain? Certainly not!

In the grand redemptive purpose of God in Jesus Christ, all of the physical creation is moving toward its inevitable triumph. The resurrection of the bodies of God's redeemed children will signal the liberation of the creation itself from its bondage to decay (Romans 8:21).

So, what will be your eternal future? Either you will follow Satan's rebellion and suffer the eternal consequences, or you will accept God's offer of redemption and eternal life in Jesus Christ and enjoy the eternal blessings. The choice is yours.

When we consider the cross, we think of the unutterable agony that the Son of God suffered in our place and on our behalf. His pain was our gain. "Christ died for your sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God" (1 Peter 3:18 NIV).

So, do not delay. Come to Christ and get reconciled to God. *Do it now.*