

Lessons from Pain
By Paula Vail

Greetings. I feel the Lord wants me to share some of what I've learned over the last year of living with persistent pain.

First, I want to share briefly from the quick survey I did when I asked the class, "Are you in pain now?" and "What is your worst pain from the past?" There were 29 responses. Of those 29, only 4 said they had no current pain. Of those who did share their pain:

- 21 shared physical pains, including physical issues resulting from injury, illness, and excess weight
- 18 shared emotional pains from abuse, death of a loved one, loss of relationships, drug addiction, depression
- 5 shared spiritual pains like not rearing children in the way of the Lord, unsaved children, the consequences of selfish choices
- 1 shared financial difficulties

One person noted correctly that mental anguish can lead to physical pain...and physical suffering can lead to mental distress.

Let's pray: Lord, may the words I share today be only from You. Let them be helpful and challenging to those who hear them today. And I ask that these here would pray for me because sharing with them is stretching me further than I've stretched since my college gymnastics' days. Amen.

Does God intend suffering for us in this life? What do you think? What does Scripture say?

- *For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake. Phil 1:29*
- *For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps. 1 Pet 2:21 (same verse from The Message Bible) This is the kind of life you've been invited into, the kind of life Christ lived. He suffered everything that came his way so you would know it could be done, and also know how to do it, step-by-step.*
- *And He was saying to them all, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. Luke 9:23*

Does God punish us with suffering? Yes and no. There's *retribution* for unbelievers who reject God and walk into judgment but *restoration* for God's children, to bring us back into fellowship with Him.

For the unbelievers:

- *This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment...dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. II Thess 1:5, 8*
- *He who rejects Me and does not receive My sayings has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day. John 12:48*

For the believers:

- *Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent.*
Rev 3:19
- But we can be certain the trials that come into our life come for our good.
And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. Rom 8:28
- *Consider it all joy, my brethren when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*
James 1:2

We come into this life in pain. The first thing that happens to us when we pop out of the birth canal is a slap on the bum. Most of us will also exit this life in pain. Acts 2:24 refers to the “agony” of death and Ps 116:3 says:

- *The cords of death encompassed me and the terrors of Sheol came upon me; I found distress and sorrow.*

Why can't we live a vibrant, pain-free life right up until our death? Well, sin of course. But think about it. As we grow older and pain in our life seems to increase, do we yearn for a longer life here or do we long for heaven...the presence of God...and a new body? Though we don't fully know what our new bodies will be like, I long to be transformed into something new like that grain of wheat that is planted in the ground and transformed into something totally new.

Like others, I've had pains in my past. But I give all praise to God I was reared in a stable, loving family and have been blessed with good health and gainful employment through most of my years. Prior to January 2016, I was among the most active people in the class, though Cathy Newman has run a few more marathon races than I have. I've hiked Grand Canyon rim-to-rim multiple times and done over 45 rafting trips through Grand Canyon. But in Jan 2016, I began to have lingering knee pain for no apparent reason. Eventually, I had constant swelling and pain and the cause could not be determined. Doctors' diagnoses were divergent and at times, in exact opposition to each other, ranging from “there is nothing physically wrong with your knee” to “you need a full knee replacement.”

In November 2017, both knees, legs, and feet became swollen. By December, inflammation had also spread to my hands and every joint from my shoulders down - including wrists and hips - all swollen and painful to the point where I could only get on one pair of shoes from my closet, I was unable to dress myself or even push the button on my electric toothbrush. Over the course of about 6 months I saw a total of 16 doctors and medical practitioners, but no diagnosis was made other than “inflammation.” I praise God I never had knee surgery, which was a total misdiagnosis.

I prayed for God to take it away and asked others to pray for me. When that didn't happen, I prayed for God to show me what He had for me during this time in my life and that He would draw me closer to Him during this time of suffering...and to help me learn fast!

My healing began with a medical practitioner who cared about me enough to make a house call after finding out from Tom I basically wasn't leaving the house. The next day she came armed with a very austere diet, a juicer, and supplements. After about 10 days, I began to see improvements in my feet and my body slowly began to heal. Through trial and error and feeding my body anti-inflammatory foods *only*, now, 3 months later, I have seen about a 20% improvement.

I've heard a good message has 3 points, and a friend gave me the 3 points to share – tell them what you are going to tell them, tell them, then tell them what you told them. I'd like to share some of the lessons I have learned over the past year about pain and pray it might be beneficial to you. And this must be a quadruply good message...because I have 12 points to share.

During this time, I read an excellent book by Elmer Towns entitled [Pain: The Divine Mystery: Why God Allows Suffering](#) which allowed me to see I was not alone in how I was feeling and organize my thoughts. Here is just some of what I learned.

1. First, enlist prayer support. Pain shouts at us in our suffering and even takes away the ability to think straight. There were days when I was so depleted I felt I was just existing, not *living*. During those times, I couldn't even pray for myself. Nothing seemed to relieve what I was going through. I didn't want anyone around, and all I did was sleep 12-16 hours a day. It allowed me to escape the pain temporarily and was exactly what my body needed. But I also needed those in the background holding me up in prayer.

2. Our reaction to pain is often more important than the pain itself. First remember pain is inevitable. Disease occurs, our bodies wear out, and accidents happen. Pain can be protective to keep you from continuing to hurt yourself. Don't exaggerate your pain. Very few people want to hear an unending litany of your troubles. Look past your current situation with hope to the future. I've learned from my parents to say, "Tomorrow will be better." Be a blessing to others. When your mind is focused on others, your thinking is distracted away from yourself and your pain is actually less. It will also help you lose the feeling of helplessness, which is sometimes worse than any physical pain. Let your mind dwell on the things you *can* do rather than those you can't and expect God to continue to use you. Remembering there is a divine purpose to pain, allow yourself to look through it to find meaning and become more like Christ, remembering all things work together according to *His* purpose, not yours.

3. Goal-oriented suffering is easier than ignorant suffering. In [God's Chisel](#), the Skit Guys illustrate when God chisels away at our sin, it hurts. But once they recognize the process will make them more like Christ, they willingly succumb to the remolding. Goal-oriented suffering is easier than ignorant suffering. One example of this is a birthing mother.

Two questions we might ask:

- 1). Why am I suffering?
- 2). How shall I suffer?

Which do you think is the more important of those two questions? God is much more interested in our response to pain than our understanding of it. His purpose is to reveal Himself. Suffering is good when it drives us to God. Rom 5:3-5 says:

And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

We can be certain that when the chisel is in God's hand, it is for our ultimate good.

4. It might also help you to remember there is always someone worse off than you. Joni Eareckson Tada is in constant pain, yet she maintains her cheerful disposition because she can do nothing but rely on the Lord and sees her suffering as the opportunity to identify with the suffering of Christ and become more like Him. I've thought of Joni many times as I struggled and knew if she could make it through, so could I. And my bout with pain has also given me a better understanding of those who are in constant, unending pain and get hooked on painkillers. I can't even imagine pain which continues for years.

5. Think eternity. Over 20 years ago, I heard a sermon in NC by Tommy Oaks I will never forget. The concept of thinking eternity can change your life *daily!* Thinking about eternity can be a difficult concept though. After all, how do you think about something that has no beginning and will never come to an end? In II Cor 4:8-10, Paul was not having a good time.

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.

What word is prevalent in those verses? Every time Paul describes the bad things that were happening, he counters with... "but." Paul was thinking e-ter-ni-ty. Our light affliction lasts but for a moment. But, everything you see right now in this room is temporary.

Let's try to use the ceiling for a minute to picture eternity. Imagine the peak of the ceiling as a line. Of course, if it were a good representation, it would not stop at the front and back of this room, but suppose it continued on without end. If that line were eternity, how much of that line would represent our earthly existence? Maybe a...dot. And how much of that dot does our pain (or that scratch on your car, or your favorite team's loss) represent in light of all eternity? It has nothing to do with the line; it is barely a *speck* on the *dot*. Soon and very soon we will leave the dot and go onto the line. The next time something upsets you, remind yourself, "It's just a dot."

6. Allow God's peace to comfort you. Satan will plant fear in your mind. What if I never get better? What if I can never _____ again? I've had those thoughts, but in my depths of despair, I also countered with knowing if I died, I would be with the Lord. And would it really, in the light of eternity, make a difference if I never hiked the Grand Canyon again? I agree with Paul when he said in Philippians, "To be with the Lord is far better." Do you remember an often-repeated phrase in the Bible, used more than 80 times? "Fear not!" Though God allowed many people in the Bible to go through difficult times, He never wanted them to fear, but to trust in Him, to give them peace in the midst of their storm.

7. Be patient. Pain has a way of robbing you of your patience. You want the pain to go away and you want it to go away *now*. But God does not usually work according to our timetable. He wants us to learn patience. Why? James 1:2-4 says:

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

Again, we seem to be back to the goal of making us more like Christ. Remember too that patience is a fruit of the Spirit and we cannot will this in ourselves. It is the Holy Spirit's job to grow the fruit of patience in us. Just like vegetables we plant in the ground, *time* is required for them to mature. Perhaps God is using the soil of suffering from our pain to mature patience in us.

8. Let others help you. We often feel helpless to know *how* to help friends who are suffering, other than praying for them. We offer to "do anything" for them but then do nothing. Try to think of specific ways you can help - like picking up groceries or prescriptions, sending a card, stopping in for a pre-arranged *short* visit to encourage them *if* they are up for it. Give your friend hope. Talk about the future and things you can do together when they feel better.

As the person who needs help, *allow* others to help you. Try to think of specific things that will *truly* help, like asking others to help with food prep or to take your spouse out for a meal or a hike to give him a break and cheer him up. He is hurting too.

9. Refrain from saying, "I could never _____ [give up gluten/smoking/speak in public]. When the alternatives are few and the pain is desperate, you *will* find a way to do what you thought you could not. Jesus will help you. In Psalm 23, did the Good Shepherd *offer* rest? No, He said, I will *make* you lie down in green pastures. Is He right now whispering something you need to change for your own health or well-being? Listen to His still small voice and act before it is forced upon you. I've heard, "Your genes load the pistol, but your lifestyle fires the bullets." Do you have a destructive routine you seem to have no power to change? Perhaps God is breaking your spirit so you will learn from that pain and break you from that old way of doing things.

Yield your will to God. Our body is His temple. Rom 12:1 says,

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.

10. Keep a gratitude journal. It is very easy to focus only on the negative. But there are so many things, even in our pain, for which we can be thankful. A friend of mine says, “The ladder out of the pit is praise.” Ouch! My biggest gratitude is for my husband, who has been an absolute angel through this. His willingness to help me do all the things I couldn’t do for myself (and I could list many) and never lose patience, was a picture to me of Christ’s love for the church. I now have a gratitude journal and daily write down at least one thing for which I was thankful that day. God is pleased when we praise him. In Psalm 150:1-6, God tells us

Praise the Lord! Praise God in His sanctuary; praise Him in His mighty expanse! Praise Him for His mighty deeds; praise Him according to His excellent greatness! Praise Him with trumpet sound; praise Him with lute and harp! Praise Him with timbrel and dancing; praise Him with string instruments and pipe! Praise Him with loud cymbals; praise Him with resounding cymbals! Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Praise the Lord.

In those 6 short verses, God tells us to praise Him 13 times!

11. Remember, God is the healer. Though God may use doctors, friends, and others as your path to healing, they are only tools in His hands. In addition, your cooperation in the process is required. If you are given instructions and refuse to follow them, do not expect healing to occur.

So Jesus was saying to those Jews who believed in Him, “If you continue in My word, then, you are disciples of Mine; and you will know truth, and the truth will make you free. John 8:31-32

Many people ask me what is causing my improvement. In addition to the rigid diet, I am also doing about 20 supplements, as well as doing daily protocols like castor oil heat soaks for an hour, 15-minute Epsom salt baths, drinking boron water, massages, and others. So, it is really impossible to tell what is helping. And the reality is, it is probably a combination of things. But none of these would be helping without faithfully following what I know to do and God’s intervention.

12. Friends are well meaning and want to help you in your suffering. But sometimes the offers of suggestions can be overwhelming. Though I was never offended by people asking if I had tested for x, y, or z, it started to get to Tom when he felt people were telling him how to “fix me,” as if perhaps he wasn’t doing everything he should. Lesson learned – in the future, I will try to remember to ask first, “I have some information that might help you. Would you like me to share it with you?”

So what have I learned from all this? There may be more lessons because it is not over. I will likely be on this diet for at least another 4 months, and who knows when, or if, I'll be able to reduce the supplement intake. But what I've learned so far is the 12 things I have shared with you and to ask, Lord, let me not fear the chisel but help me remember the dot.

Prayer: Lord let us not waste our sufferings but learn the lessons You have for us through them. Allow us to recognize that each personal trial is sifted through Your hands to teach us to hate sin more and learn to identify with You in your suffering - how much You gave so that we might be redeemed and become Your child, able to call You Abba, Father. Amen.

References:

Pain: The Divine Mystery: Why God Allows Suffering - Elmer Towns

The Skit Guys – God's Chisel (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3QCkBL2DfVg>)

Joni Eareckson Tada's daily devotional: <http://www.joniandfriends.org/daily-devotional/>

Tommy Oaks - Think Eternity

(<https://www.dropbox.com/s/ipouvqffvbop14f/Think%20Eternity%2009.MP3?dl=0>)

Note:

All scripture is NASB version

For those of you experiencing arthritis pain or osteoporosis, I may have some information that would benefit you. If you'd like it, please contact me at Paula@CanyonMinistries.com