

Necessary Pain

I am convinced that pain is necessary. If the word “necessary” causes you to put up a wall and stop paying attention, I’ll soften my vocabulary and say that pain is purposeful. (But I really mean necessary.)

At first pass, the concept of “necessary pain” doesn’t make much sense. To most of us our troubles seem at best unnecessary and at worst the cruel work of an uncaring God. Pain causes us to wrestle with the basics of God’s character. If God cares, if He’s good, why doesn’t He remove our pain? Perhaps He doesn’t care; perhaps He isn’t good; perhaps He has no power over pain. Or, perhaps God has His reasons for allowing pain, even horrific pain, to invade our lives.

Several biblical insights on God’s reasons for allowing pain helped me trust His character, but these insights often felt abstract, somewhat impersonal, less than satisfying. My eyes opened when I looked closely at Jesus’ pain in the Garden of Gethsemane. His interchange with His Father deeply calmed my heart. I began to find courage to abandon my own life to God’s will.

Jesus' Pain Was Necessary

Could good come without the cross? No, it could not. And Jesus, knowing that, faced His agonizing garden struggle:

My Father, if this [cup] cannot pass away unless I drink it, Thy will be done (Matthew 26:42) ... He began to pray that if it were possible, the hour might pass Him by (Mark 14:35) ... Father, if Thou art willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Thine be done (Luke 22:42).

Matthew, Mark, and Luke each pick up different nuances of this event. Matthew emphasizes Jesus’ active cooperation with God’s will: unless I drink it. Mark shows us Jesus’ longing for a less horrific solution to our alienation from God: Is there any other possibility? Any other way? Must I yield to this horror? And Luke makes clear the Father’s will: There is no other way. Unless you die, those we cherish will suffer forever. Luke also reveals that Jesus trusted His Father’s heart: not my will but thine be done. Jesus knew His pain was necessary; He trusted the Father’s character.

Could good come without Jesus suffering? No, it could not. The Father does not interrupt Jesus’ pain because that pain would produce a good that otherwise could not happen. This was a necessary pain.

But what if God didn’t think this way? What if we had a god who allowed unnecessary pain? What would that say about him? The conclusion is frightening: we’d be stuck with a sadist or a wimp, a god who doesn’t care, isn’t good, or has no power over pain. Jesus (God made visible) has shown us a vastly different picture. He’s shown us a caring, good, and powerful God.

Suffering didn’t cause Jesus to question God’s goodness or power, nor did it move Him to question the necessity of His pain. He didn’t resent His suffering or wallow in self-pity. We hesitate to imitate Him.

What About Our Pain?

Jesus' pain was necessary. But what about the pain you and I experience? Is our suffering necessary? I believe it is. God hasn't changed. He relates to us with the same compassion that He displayed towards His beloved Son. As with Jesus, God allows our pain if (and only if) pain is the only way for good to occur. Eden required no pain for good to thrive. Heaven needs no pain for good to flourish. Yet, in this fallen world, sometimes the only path to good is through pain. God hungers for good – for us and for others – and sometimes good requires pain.

I am not saying that pain is God's goal or that He in any way enjoys pain. But I am saying that God has good reasons for pain, reasons that go far beyond our present day suffering.

God knows something we often miss: removing pain has serious consequences. Allowing pain allows things that could not happen without its presence, good things like providing the freedom to love, like gaining time to repent, like learning to pay attention to God, like deepening our obedience, like displaying God's power as others watch Him transform our hearts. There are more crucial issues than removing pain. You may disagree. Let me explain. We'll start with love.

Providing the Freedom to Love

Pain, surprisingly, evolves from God's unwavering commitment to love. This happens because love is a choice. It has to be. We can't coerce another person to love us, nor can they require that we love them. Love can't be forced; it must be chosen. Love without choice ceases to be love.

Love requires choice, and therein lies the problem. God wants us to choose to love, but what if we don't? What if we choose instead to mistreat each other and inflict pain? When God opens the door to love He has also opened the door to pain, because choice allows us to embrace ... or to reject ... love.

There are more crucial issues than removing pain. One of these is providing the freedom to love. Love is God's priority. Is it yours? What is more important to you – the freedom to love, or relief from pain?

Giving Unbelievers Time to Repent

What about repentance (I'm referring here to salvation)? How does pain figure into that scenario? Look at it this way: whom do you know that has not yet chosen Jesus? Would you be willing to live a while longer in this fallen world to give them time to change their mind? God says that He delays His return – and the end of pain – to give more people a chance to come to Him (see 2 Peter 3:9). While His delay allows pain to continue, it also provides unbelievers with an opportunity that otherwise could not occur.

There are more crucial issues than removing pain. One of these is giving unbelievers time to repent. Do you agree with God's decision to wait?

Learning to Pay Attention to God

Pain gets our attention. It may shock us into beginning a relationship with God; it may jolt us to cry for help from the God we already know. Think about your own experience. Do you turn to God more readily when you're handling life well or when you find yourself overwhelmed by your circumstances? Stress, hurt, and helplessness often trigger a reach for God. God used pain to bring me into His kingdom. He still uses pain to remind me to depend on Him. If that's what it takes to get my attention, I'm not going to quarrel with Him.

There are more crucial issues than removing pain. One of these is learning to pay attention to God. Do you trust Him with suffering that is necessary to teach you to turn to Him?

Deepening Our Obedience

Pain transforms us; it encourages and deepens obedience. “Obedience” that costs nothing really doesn’t qualify as obedience. (How hard is it to do something that we actually want to do?) But when obeying God carries a price, we wrestle with yielding to His will. Jesus Himself learned obedience by the things that He suffered (see Hebrews 5:8). When suffering, we (as did He) learn a more profound obedience than could possibly come from easier circumstances.

There are more crucial issues than removing pain. One of these is deepening our obedience. Do you trust Him with suffering that is necessary to make you more like Him?

Displaying God’s Power to Transform

We tend not to notice that God is making us increasingly like Himself. For one thing, we’re too busy looking at all the ways we mess up. For another, it feels presumptuous to think that we’re becoming like God. But we are becoming like Him, and He displays this transformation vividly as He teaches us to trust Him with pain.

Sufferers often move into some combination of self-centeredness, bitterness, fear, and despair. Those who don’t react this way mystify us. A terminal cancer patient radiates peace. A woman going blind finds herself invaded by joy. These are unnatural reactions. We have no power to pull off such glory. And that’s the point – human inability points people to God’s ability. When God teaches a sufferer to trust Him with their pain, pain becomes a witness.

There are more crucial issues than removing pain. One of these is displaying God’s power to produce His character in us. Have you ever seen God transform the character of a sufferer? Do you trust Him with your own transformation?

Trusting Pain ... Trusting God

We may have no idea what particular purpose our particular pain serves. But we can trust that God will never – *never* – allow us unnecessary pain. He’s not that kind of God.

Jesus, trusting the Father, walked through (and beyond) His necessary pain. He asks us to follow in His footsteps as we walk through (and beyond) ours. Jesus hated His suffering, yet also anticipated the joy to follow. He knew what we need to know: pain breaks God’s heart but does not contradict His love. Sometimes good requires pain. Sometimes pain is necessary. There are more crucial issues than removing pain.

So hate pain, but don’t distrust it. And don’t distrust God. He’s working all things together to produce good that can come no other way. All things. Including pain.