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The Blessing of Pain

Gregg Mendel

Coming across friends is hard when someone lives in the country. That's why I valued my friend Nate so much. He was the only kid I liked, or liked me, for miles around (in fact, he was the only kid for miles around). Nate and I grew to be very strong friends, and our relationship seemed as good and normal as a relationship could be, till the last winter before I left for college. Nate starting acting a little strange, like hiding from his parents and other people at random times, or zoning out in the middle of a conversation, but I didn't think that much about it. Until he tried to commit suicide. I learned that Nate had developed depression and slight schizophrenia. He was immediately taken away from his family and put in a psych ward, and even after he got better, authorities kept him away from his parents for almost a year. The aching and loneliness I, Nate, and his family experienced was terrible. But one of the worst parts of this trial was wondering why God, who always wants the best for us, allowed us to go through this pain.

The problem of pain has always bothered Christians. For non-believers, pain is just something that everyone has to deal with and can't do anything about; it's just part of nature. But Christians see pain differently. God loves and cares for mankind more than we could ever imagine, but He also allows us to experience pain. C.S. Lewis's aptly named book *The Problem of Pain* talks about this conundrum (89-109). When most people would think of pain as a curse, Lewis sees it as a necessity, and I couldn't agree with him more. But I think I must take it one step further. Pain is not only a necessity but also a blessing, because it warns us, corrects us, guides us, and brings us to Jesus.

Pain can be a blessing in many different ways, and the first is as a warning system. When a person stubs his or her toe, it obviously does not feel good. This is because God designed the body so it could experience pain. But hundreds of people in hospitals and emergency rooms around the world ask themselves, "wouldn't life

be better if we never had to feel a cut on our leg or the excruciating pain of an exploded appendix?” The answer is no, life wouldn’t be better. The pain sourcebook, a guide to how pain works, states that when a person get injured, the nerves in the body start signaling the brain that something is wrong, and the pain felt is the body’s way of informing that person of the problem (Shannon 6-7). But this is not an unnecessary action, it is protection. Leprosy is an excellent example of why people should be thankful for pain. Shumet, Demissie, and Bekele describe leprosy in their article on the disease as a bacterial infection that stops the ability to feel pain (313-314). People with leprosy are usually missing fingers because they couldn’t feel the difference between cutting vegetables and cutting digits off. They have burn marks all over their bodies from when they leaned against a stove and couldn’t tell that their hand was on fire. Many graves are filled by people with the disease who didn’t know that their appendix had burst because they felt no discomfort, and therefore did nothing about it. Their world is a dangerous place. Dr. Paul Brand talks about his surgical work with lepers in his book *The Gift Nobody Wants*. He witnessed firsthand what it is like to go through life without pain, and he saw how the painless life of his patients slowly destroyed them, as they lost fingers limbs, and eventually their lives. When his first grandson was born, he remembers thanking God that the child cried after being pricked in the finger, showing that he felt the jab of the needle (196-197). This baby had the gift nobody wanted; pain.

Pain that comes from punishment can be a blessing too, because it keeps us from sin. Punishment is one of the best ways for humans learn their lessons, as is seen throughout many passages in the bible, like Zacharias who lost his speech for doubting God. Many people, like authors Straus, Douglas, and Medeiros who wrote the book *The Primordial Violence*, believe that punishment does not help people learn lessons but instead makes them more violent and rebellious (81-92). But common sense can prove their belief wrong. If a parent sits a child down and tells him all the reasons why painting the living room in chocolate was a bad thing to do, but does not punish them, the child will see that they can get away with it and will do it again when their parents are gone. But if a parent sits a child down, not on the coach for a talk, but instead on their knee to have a spanking, that kid will think twice about

being artistic with chocolate sauce. In the same way God uses pain as a punishment to reinforce right from wrong. If the Lord wrote in the Bible that adultery was bad, but didn't punish anyone who slept around, no one would follow his commandments, because there would be no immediate consequences. But when God adds pain, like a man losing the respect of his wife after being caught cheating, we listen to Him more than if there was no punishment at all. I'm not saying that people are always punished for adultery, like with the woman caught in adultery in John 8 (King James Version), but enough people are punished to scare us away from this sin. 1 Thessalonians 5:22 commands "Abstain from all appearance of evil" (KJV). And because punishment keeps us away from sin and evil, I would count it as a blessing.

Another reason pain is a blessing is that it not only corrects us but can be used to guide us. I know a student that came to college set on being an engineer. He had always gotten good grades in high school, and was ready to do the same in the next step of his education. But things didn't go as planned. He started having trouble in many of his science classes, and didn't feel drawn to anything he was leaning about. He started praying and asking God what he was supposed to do. The Lord eventually began calling him to ministry, and that's his major today. The emotional pain he went through, like disappointing grades and the feeling of losing his love for what he had wanted to do since he was a kid, eventually showed him what God wanted in his life. Sometimes people must endure a little pain before they can see the Lord's will.

Even pain that doesn't warn, guide, or punish is both a necessity and a blessing. Let's focus first on why this "random pain" is a necessity. It is necessary because we rebelled against God. When Adam and Eve lived in the Garden of Eden, God promised that if they rebelled against him there would be consequences, like pain and death. We defied Him anyway and our world fell apart. This is why things like Central Pain Syndrome exist. This syndrome is caused by damage to the central nervous system, usually by stroke. It tops the charts for the worst physical pain humans can endure and it is described as feeling like the body is on fire all day long, and walking in the wind is like walking through razor blades. It is the feeling of a dentist jabbing a tooth nerve, except that pain is everywhere in the body. Many people say that it doesn't seem right

that a kind, innocent mother has to go through useless pain like this. In the same way, they say it seems like a hardworking man shouldn't have to go through the pain of losing everything he has worked for, or parents have to go through the searing loss of their child. To many it feels like in these moments God is just throwing around pain for no particular reason. But what we all must realize is that the innocent mother with Central pain syndrome is not really innocent. As much as I hate to say it, she deserves what she is getting. As I mentioned earlier, when mankind rebelled against the Lord, they brought sin and death upon themselves. That mother doesn't just deserve Central Pain Syndrome, she also deserves hell, just the way I do. No one likes to think of pain this way, but it's true. The agony parents feel when their child is injured may not be a direct punishment for a particular sin, but it is still necessary because God promised there would be pain if we turned against Him, and the Lord can't go back on His promises.

The pain of this fallen world is also a blessing because it brings us to Jesus. If the world contained no discomfort, everything would seem perfect. No one would get sick, hungry, sad, or frustrated. We would live out our happy lives, and then one-day die peacefully in our sleep. This sounds perfect, but in reality it's a horror story. Without pain, people would soon forget about God, because people wouldn't need Him, just the way the rich man in the bible "didn't need Jesus". Matthew 19:24 says "And again I say unto you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God" (King James Version). Tremper Longman's biblical commentary *The Expositors Bible Commentary* talks about how it nearly impossible for a rich man to enter into heaven; he sees no reason to worry about his eternal future because he has no problems in the present (Longman 480). This is how people would feel without pain. They wouldn't be scared of hell because they wouldn't know what agony was. Everyone would die thinking all is well, and wake up in eternal torment. This is where pain comes in. When we are broken, lonely, terrified, and sad we realize that we live in a fallen world. We recognize our sin, and hopefully come running to the Lord.

As for my friend Nate, that suicide attempt was the best thing that ever happened to him. On his way to the correctional facility, two police officers led him to Christ. Everyone, including myself,

thought that he was saved. He could have gone through life relatively painless, died a quiet death, and gone straight to hell. Comfort would have doomed him, but pain brought him to accept Jesus. Thank God for pain, the most hated blessing of all time.

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