

What does the Bible say about pain?

August 29, 2021 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone



The question that we're going to look at this morning is short and to the point:

“What does the Bible say about pain?”

Good question. And I'll be honest with you, when I got this question, I thought, 'this will be great. I'm going to search through the Bible with a fine tooth comb and give the church the definitive discussion on pain and why we have it and how we can get rid of it...'

And yet the more I read, the less sure I was that I could do that. Because the Bible doesn't really explain why we experience pain and it doesn't really tell us how to get rid of it; it simply assumes that pain is a reality in human experience and that God is with us in the midst of it.

I'll tell you what I did to get ready for this morning – I opened up my Bible software on my computer and did a search in the NIV for all the appearances of the word 'pain.'ⁱ 39 times it appeared.ⁱⁱ And then I did a search on the Hebrew and Greek equivalents that lay behind it and then I read through all of those verses to see if there were any themes that stood out. And there were. So I'm going to give you three of those themes - 1. Pain is part of life in a fallen world. 2. God is with us in it and 3. It won't last forever. Let's explore those one at a time. So first -

1. Pain is part of life in a fallen world.

Here I want to start with a little thought exercise. Think back to Genesis 1 and 2; Adam and Eve are living in the Garden; they're enjoying fellowship with God and life the way that God intended it. Did they experience pain? Did their feet hurt when they stepped on stones? Did they feel pain when they tripped and fell?

To be honest, I suspect that they did. Because God knew what He was doing when He put us together. He made us with built-in pain receptors so that we would recognize that our bodies were in danger. When you touch a hot pan, you know to get your finger back as soon as possible so it doesn't burn. In a sense then, pain is a good thing, as an early warning system. I suspect Adam and Eve experienced pain, maybe not as a painful thing, but as a discomfort that said 'something's not right here and you need to do something about it.'

But when Adam and Eve turned their back on God, when they said 'God, we know better than You,' something in them changed. Something got twisted. Romans 8:20 says that

20 [All of] creation was subjected to frustration... Verse 21 - [All of creation] became subject to decay, such that verse 22 - [all of] creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

The implication here is that when Adam and Eve disobeyed God, everything good that God made broke down. All of Creation became subject to decay and I think that that's why pain is what it is today. The 'good' early warning system got twisted by the Fall and the 'pain' part of pain got cranked up to eleven and became more than the 'early warning system' that we really needed. Intense pain and chronic suffering became a part of life.

And I think you see that in the words God says right after the Fall. Genesis 3:16, God says to Eve - NIV Genesis 3:16 To the woman he said, (because of your rebellion) "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children."

I suspect that Eve would have experienced pain in childbirth before the Fall, but only enough to tell her – baby's coming. But now, post-Fall, that pain was increased, it was multiplied and many of you know what that pain is like.

And Eve wasn't alone in this. (Not to say that this is the same or even close to the pain of childbirth) but at the same time, God said to Adam - "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life" (Gen 3:17 NIV).

At first, fruits and veggies would grow without much effort for our first forefathers, but now, they would have to work hard for their food, suffer painful blisters and aching muscles just to eek out enough to survive.

Pain went from being a signal to alert you to danger to an alarm that just won't shut off, that keeps ringing and ringing well beyond its purpose.

And that's why many of us live with aches and chronic pains today. Studies suggest that half the population deals with chronic pain and some 20% find that it interferes with everyday life.ⁱⁱⁱ I know that many of you are in that boat.

It's because we live in a fallen world where what God planned for good got twisted beyond its intended purpose. God did not create back pain and shingles and migraines and fibromyalgia; they are all fall out from our shared refusal to trust that God is really as good as He says He is.

Having pain does not necessarily mean that you've done something wrong and God's punishing you for it; more often than not, the reality is that we suffer these things because we live in a world that got broken when we turned our backs on God. Pain is part of life in a fallen world.

But even so, and this is my second theme, God is with us in it.

Even in the depths of pain, we are never alone. God is there with us. The God who made us and redeemed us and cares for us is with us in our experience of pain.

Even more importantly though, He's been there too. He is with us as someone who can identify with us in the pain. When God came to earth in the person of His Son Jesus, He learned what aches and pains feel like. He experienced everything from skinned knees to pounding headaches to the searing pain of crucifixion. He knows what it's like to suffer and so He can identify with us in the pain.

Hebrews 4:15 puts it like this - 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin. 16 Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (Heb 4:14-16 NIV).

In Jesus, God put on flesh and came to earth and experienced what life is like in this fallen world. He can sympathize with us in our aches and pains and so He is more than ready to provide mercy and grace in time of need. I like how Philip Yancey says it -

“Jesus took on the same body you and I have. His nerve fibers were not bionic – they screamed with pain when they were misused. And above all, Jesus was surely misused. Crucifixion means we are not abandoned...”

And then he quotes Dorothy Sayers who says - “For whatever reason God chose to make man as he is – limited and suffering and subject to sorrows and death – He had the honesty and courage to take His own medicine... He Himself has gone through the whole of human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair and death” (In Yancey, 27).^{iv}

Jesus may not have suffered exactly what you’re suffering from, but He knows what it’s like - the pain, the frustration, the exhaustion of ‘when is this ever going to end?’ He knows the indignities of suffering and the discouragement of pain and so He can identify with us when we experience them for ourselves.

And so, in light of Hebrews 4:14-16, we ... approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (Heb 4:14-16 NIV).

That’s certainly what Myndi Orr says to do. Getting ready for today, I read this really interesting book - ‘Don’t waste your pain’^v written by this Myndi Orr, a woman my age, who has trigeminal neuralgia - it has left her with severe facial pain, and the need for surgeries where they go in through her skull to remove blood vessels that put pressure on specific nerves on her brain (Orr, 35).

In ‘Don’t waste your pain,’ she reflects on what it means to follow Jesus in the midst of chronic pain and she writes - “When I am in the pit of frustration, I cry out to God for strength. I know He has endured pain and I know He can relate to me in my suffering. That is where true peace comes in” (52).

God is with us in the pain.

Pain is part of life in a fallen world and God is with us in the pain; those are my first two points; my third is this - it won’t last forever. It may not seem like it in the midst of suffering, but one day, that pain will be gone.

Just listen to John’s vision of the future in Revelation 21.

1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.

2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.

4 He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

There will come a day when your muscles will no longer ache, your shoulders will no longer droop. The frustrations and limitations of these earthly bodies will be gone and we will live in the presence of God forever. Jesus suffered on the Cross in our place so that all who believe in Him and live for Him could become the people of God and so look forward to this eternal reward. No more crying, no more pain; death and mourning a thing of the past. Just stop and think of that. What will your life be like without the pain and physical limitations that we know now? That day is coming.

Pain will not last forever.

So what do we do in the midst of it? What do we do when it hurts so much?

Myndi Orr writes "You may be thinking at this point, 'I didn't choose this painful condition I have. I didn't choose cancer, or lupus, or the death of my child.' True, but you are choosing how you react to God and to the world in and through your pain" (Orr, 59).

She continues "How am I going to handle myself in the midst of pain? How am I going to use my time for God's glory? How can I use the abilities God gave me despite the pain I experience every hour of the day?" (Orr, 2)... "God has a plan in the brokenness. God knows your heart and limitations... God can use your suffering to speak to the heart of others" (Orr, 6).

And she's right. Remember 2 Corinthians 1:4-6? 3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, 4 who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.

I can't presume to understand why it is that you are suffering like you do, but I do know this. You are not alone in it. God is with you in it and comforting you and strengthening you, in such a way that makes you uniquely suited to share your experience of God's grace with others.

I actually found a newspaper article online from when 'Don't waste your pain' was published. Apparently various doctors have put nerve patients in contact with Myndi Orr, including one physician who was in severe pain.

She said - "It was a blessing to reach out to her and to offer her comfort," Orr said. "She found hope in someone who could identify with her pain. This is why I'm thankful for my pain."^{vi}

God comforts us so that we can comfort others.

And sometimes God allows us to suffer to shift our attention back to Him. Joni Eareckson Tada has written "Suffering lob a hand-grenade into our self-centredness, blasting our soul bare, so we can be better bonded to the Saviour" (33).^{vii} Pain can move us closer to God, growing ever more dependent upon Him.

And a little later in 2 Corinthians, Paul says something to put it all into perspective - 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 he says 16 Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.

17 For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. 18 So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal (2Co 4:16-18 NIV).

Paul pulls back the curtain on our suffering and shows us what's really going on. Outwardly, we are wasting away. Every day our bodies can do less and less. And yet, inwardly, God is renewing us day by day, giving us the strength that we need to persevere in His name. And while a particularly acute bout of pain may seem to go on forever and ever, Paul says 'No, that is but a momentary, light affliction' that is preparing us for the eternal weight of glory, which outweighs any pain that you might experience.

Think about that - as great as your pain may be, the glory which you will experience in God's presence is even greater. If you're feeling 10/10 pain now, you're going to know level 20 glory in eternity. So don't lose heart and don't give up. Fix your eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. And know that this momentary affliction is preparing for you the eternal weight of glory.

I want to close by giving Myndi Orr the last word here. At the end of her book, she writes: "Each time someone asks how I am doing, I have two options: the truth or a lie. I used to say 'I am doing well. Thank you.'" I didn't want the conversation to be sour because of how I was doing. I hid it for so long. I finally realized I needed to be truthful. This was a way I could let others know how God was working on me, not necessarily my physical being, but my heart. My answer changed to "I am in pain, but God is sustaining me." This answer not only told the truth, but it also gave credit where credit was due. God was and is sustaining me" (Orr, 78).

We live in a fallen world and so pain is a part of life. Even so, God is with us in it. He knows what it's like to have aching muscles, painful sores; the Cross shows us that we are never alone in our suffering. And while pain may seem to last forever, it won't. The day is coming when pain is no more and these momentary light afflictions are preparing us for the eternal weight of glory. So look for ways to partner with God in your pain, because He has been and is sustaining you. Let's pray.

ⁱ I went to my Bible software and did a search on the word 'pain' – that appeared 39 times in the 1984 NIV. Then I went to the Hebrew word that they translated 'pain' and that appeared 46 times. And then the Greek word for pain and it appeared 60 times. (Now, you may wonder why 'pain' only appears in English 39 times when the Greek and Hebrew equivalents appear more – that's because the Hebrew word doesn't just mean pain, it also means distress. And the Greek word doesn't just mean pain, it also means sorrow). So pain, distress and sorrow are related ideas in the Bible's worldview.

ⁱⁱ 1/3 of the appearances are related to 'birth pains.'

ⁱⁱⁱ Gary Collins, *Christian Counselling*, 3rd ed., 458.

^{iv} Philip Yancey, "The Gift of Pain," in *Be still my soul*, Edited by Nancy Guthrie.

^v <http://www.dontwasteyourpainthebook.com/>

https://www.facebook.com/dontwasteyourpain/?ref=page_internal

^{vi} <https://www.vdailypress.com/article/20130709/NEWS/307099990>

^{vii} Joni Eareckson Tada, "God's plan A," in *Be still my soul*, Ed. Nancy Guthrie.