

Chronic Pain

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In the movie, *The Princess Bride*, one of the characters, the Dread Pirate Robert, drives home a point to the heroine, Princess Buttercup. As she laments the loss of her one true love, he rebukes her self-pity with the statement, *“Life is pain, Princess, and anyone who tells you differently is trying to sell you something.”*

Did you ever feel that way? That life is pain? That the future will be little more than one long emotional, physical or relational toothache?

The question usually intensifies as we grow older and our painful experiences move from being acute to being chronic. Acute pain can be severe, but it does go away in a relatively short period of time: we break a bone; a child gets caught lying; we cannot manage the household budget; our parents overstay their welcome during the holidays.

But chronic pain – the type that makes us think that all of life is pain – drags on without any apparent end in sight: the doctor diagnoses rheumatoid arthritis; a daughter announces an out-of-wedlock pregnancy; we default on a mountain of debt and lose our home; our aging parents move in with us.

Acute pain is a night in jail. Chronic pain is a long-term prison

sentence without parole. Acute pain cries “Ouch. I’ll never do that again.” Chronic pain moans, “Woe is me; I’ll never be free again.” I define chronic pain as a prison: any undesirable condition, circumstance, or relationship which we’d like to escape but over which we have no control.

For my wife and me, chronic pain includes living with dysfunctional family relationships that seem to deteriorate rather than improve with time – the long-term impact of an alcoholic parent. Chronic pain includes living with a ruptured disc and an incurable disease. Another parent withers towards death slowly with Alzheimer’s disease, and several siblings remain resistant and unresponsive to the Gospel despite decades of prayer.

Chronic pain for some is spiritual, like living with an unsaved spouse: even when the relationship is good, there’s still that long-term ache that you’re not on the same spiritual wavelength. For others, chronic pain is physical, like living with recurring cancer or an untreatable disease. Chronic pain also might be economic (long-term poverty), relational (watching a child choose to rebel against Christ), or social (living with long-term loneliness).

In the face of all pain, we start by asking God to heal us. We pray, “Lord, please take away the pain.” But what do we do if he doesn’t? What do we do with the chronic pain that God leaves

untouched?

YOU'RE NOT ALONE

Good news! The Bible resonates with stories of people facing chronic pain. If indeed the best analogy for chronic pain is prison, then take courage: the Bible often speaks to our situation!

Consider how much of the Bible is written about prisoners or captives – there are Old Testament Joseph, Esther, Nehemiah, and Daniel and his three friends. Or recall how much of the Bible is written to those in captivity or exile; the Old Testament is full of the history of Israel living in circumstances where their choices were taken away from them.

In the New Testament, chronic pain takes the shape of persecution. The book of Acts describes the opposition the early church faced almost every day. Books like 1st and 2nd Peter, Hebrews, and Revelation were written to encourage Christians to stay faithful – in spite of relentless, seemingly unending opposition. Other books, written by Paul while serving time in actual prison, challenge the readers to new responses to chronic pain – like joy (Philippians) or faithfulness (II Timothy).

It's good to know that we are not alone. But what do we do? When we're facing chronic pain, and we've prayed for relief, healing, or deliverance, and God has not answered in the way

that we had hoped – how do we persevere in prison? And how can we take it a step further than simple perseverance? How can we actually **grow** through our chronic pain?

REFINERS FIRE

We sometimes sing a song inviting God to be the “refiner’s fire,” purifying us to be holy and “set apart” for his kingdom purposes. It’s a dangerous song to sing, but it reflects a consistent biblical theme: we grow through chronic pain when we see God working to build our character through our “prisons.”

No one likes the idea that God develops our character through pain and long-term suffering – especially in a culture where we pursue God for blessing and prosperity. But the biblical truth is clear: whomever God loves, he disciplines through experience with pain (see Hebrews 12:15).

Discipline itself is connected to suffering. Discipline is basically “chosen hardship.” An athlete chooses and accepts voluntary suffering to expand his or her physical and mental capabilities. We followers of Christ accept the disciplines of suffering so that our characters might grow to be stronger for the race before us.

Job’s story describes his horrible ordeal of loss, disillusionment, physical and emotional suffering, but when he comes through it

all, he worships God with greater depth than ever before. “Up until now I’ve only heard about you, God, but now I’ve seen you” (my paraphrase of Job 42:5).

David reflects the same truth in Psalm 119. Pain drew him back to God and deeper into a life of obedience:

“Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I obey your word.”

“It was good for me to be afflicted, that I might learn your decrees (commandments)” (Psalm 119:67, 71).

Paul the apostle, a man deeply experienced in pain, wrote to the Romans that suffering and character development were deeply intertwined: “...we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope” (Romans 5:3-4).

The writer of Hebrews goes so far as to align suffering with the character development of Jesus. He writes, “Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered” (Hebrews 5:8). If suffering was necessary to perfect obedience in the life of Jesus, why do I want to stay immune from suffering?

At age 40, I was diagnosed as a Type 1 diabetic – so called “Juvenile Diabetes” (some said that the diagnosis confirmed my

immaturity!). We've prayed for and pursued miraculous healing, but God has yet to intervene. I live a life of insulin-dependence. I need to carefully monitor any food that I eat, and I test my blood sugars and inject insulin at least four times a day. It's a chronic disease that, without careful management, will kill me slowly through kidney failure, heart disease, blindness or other unpleasanties. I hate this disease; it's my prison.

I've struggled with why God allows such things. But as I've struggled, I've grown. I can testify to God's use of diabetes to develop my character. Because of diabetes, I live each day with a greater sense of dependence on God. Diabetes has forced me to be more diligent in physical disciplines – with a very positive result in the disciplining of my spirit. God has used it to make me more compassionate towards others and more patient with myself. I hate my prison, and if God opened the gate, I'd gladly walk to freedom – BUT I can see how my character has grown because of it. It's been good for me to be afflicted.

Perhaps the greatest lesson through this disease has been learning the connection between passion and suffering. All of us want to be more passionate for Christ, but I've learned that passion grows out of pain. The verb *pascho* (from which we get passion) literally means, "to suffer" – as in "Passion Week" or "after his passion" in Acts 1:3. Chronic pain has taught me to pray,

“Lord, please use this hardship, this prison, this chronic condition to make me more zealous to know you. Please turn my suffering into passion.”

“BUT GOD MEANT IT FOR GOOD”

Chronic hardship and long-term pain takes us through a maze of emotions. My emotional struggles have included:

ANGER: *“Why, God, are you letting this happen?”* From age 12-18, I had been through 4 surgeries, 7 broken bones, and a host of other traumas. When I ruptured the disc in my back at age 42, I ranted at God: “Enough is enough. I’ve done my time in physical prison already.” He lets us rant – often without responding!

SELF-PITY: *“Poor me. No one knows my sorrows.”* After getting diagnosed with diabetes, I saw a pumpkin pie for sale and burst into tears. My wife saw this and said, “But you don’t really like pumpkin pie.” I replied, “Yea, but I couldn’t eat it even if I wanted to.” Self-pity is seldom governed by rationality.

COMPARISON: *“Why do I have to go through this when that other guy gets let off easy?”* It’s easy to wonder with the Psalmist, “why do the heathen prosper” when God seems to have abandoned us.

GRIEVING: *"How can I deal with this long-term condition and the corresponding loss of freedom?"* A friend's son has had his tenth surgery to correct a congenital bone defect in his leg. This surgery seems to have worked, but that young man still faces lots of grieving as he realizes that his first 18 years of life were spent in braces or on crutches.

FEELING CHEATED: *"Is this really the abundant life you promised, Lord?"* I remember seeing a T-shirt with the inscription, "I prayed the prayer of Jabez and all I got was this lousy T-shirt." I felt the same way: rather than prosperity, all I got was a chronic disease. Maybe that's why it's easier to pray the prayer of Jabez – "Expand my boundaries" – than it is to pray the prayers of Jesus – "Thy will be done" and "Not my will, but Thine."

DISCOURAGEMENT: *"I've struggled with this long enough. I quit."*

Anyone confronting chronic pain, hardship or suffering will do battle with similar feelings. Family and friends, journaling, reading, and prayer, support groups and counselors all help as we ask God to enable us to deal with our chronic issues and their corresponding impact on our lives.

And over time, we learn to let go of the controls. As I grow and my character is refined, I consciously release my bitterness. I

invite God to change my attitude and my perspective on my pain. Some days there is victory; other days it's just a struggle.

As this struggle continues, I also take comfort in the fact that God uses suffering to have an impact on those around us. We grow through chronic pain when we see God's purposes to use our pain to affect a wider audience.

The Old Testament story of Joseph illustrates it well. Sold into slavery by his embittered brothers (Genesis 37:12-28), Joseph spends over twenty years in various states of hardship and prison:

Slavery gets rewarded by being falsely accused (Genesis 39:1-20).

Faithful endurance in prison gets rewarded by being forgotten (Genesis 40:23).

Faithful service to the Pharaoh results in a painful forgetting of the land of his origin. The names he gives his sons (Genesis 41:51-52) illustrate the emotional void that he confronted because others had betrayed him. The names Manasseh – "God has made me forget all my troubles and all my father's household," and Ephraim – "God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering" – reveal the pain that lay deep in Joseph's heart.

When his brothers, his betrayers, show up, Joseph struggles with

the emotions related to all of the pain of the preceding years. In one interchange with his family – before they know who he is – he needs to turn away from them so that he can explode in tears. He could not contain his pent-up emotions.

Joseph never speaks of the exact emotions I've described, but the unusual stories of Joseph toying with his brothers serve to illustrate his internal conflict. He was probably asking himself, "Should I punish them or welcome them?" Perhaps he did not know what to do with all the emotions that he felt inside.

Eventually, Joseph moves through his pain to God's wider purpose, God's saving purposes in his pain: "So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God" (Genesis 45:8). He repeats this perspective a few years later: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the salvation of many lives" (Genesis 50:19).

Joseph exemplifies that God's purposes in our suffering is often not to remove it but to give meaning to it, a meaning that transcends our individual lives and carries over into the lives of others.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians, God "comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the

comfort we ourselves have received from God" (II Corinthians 1:4). Read the descriptions of Paul's sufferings in II Corinthians 6:4-10 or II Corinthians 11:23-29 and you'll see he's not speaking lightly of his hardships, but he saw God's redemptive purposes in his pain.

The testimony of the church, beginning with the example of Jesus, whose pain redeems us, is that God can use our pain for his purposes – *IF* we let him. We pray with Jesus, "Please Lord, isn't there another way?" but then we resolve, "OK, then Lord; then please use this pain for your purposes. Let your power be perfected in my weaknesses."

Adoniram Judson, considered by most the first missionary from North America, lived a life of chronic suffering. His years in Burma included the death of two wives, the loss of seven children, imprisonment and torture, loneliness and long-term depression. But he persevered through the pain, and now, over 150 years after his death, more than 2 million Christians in Burma (now Myanmar) consider him their spiritual father.

Father Damien, Belgian missionary to the lepers of Molokai in Hawaii, lives on as a legend of the grace of God to the people of Hawaii. His statue in Honolulu stands as a tribute to his service to these lepers to the point of his own contraction and death from

leprosy. He suffered and died **with them** so that he might introduce them to the love of the one who suffered and died **FOR them**.

And consider Joni Eareckson Tada. Why do you think she has had such a powerful ministry to the world's handicapped? Because God healed her and she walked out of her wheelchair? No. She's struggled through more than 30 years of living as a quadriplegic with the prayer, "Lord, if you're not going to heal me, then please use my pain for your purposes."

I wish God would heal my diabetes, but up to this point, he hasn't. But diabetes has led me into evangelistic contact with dozens of doctors, nurses, and fellow diabetics. God has used me to encourage others living with chronic illnesses that God can use them in world missions in spite of their "prisons."

And the story repeats itself widely in the church today. A woman who was sexually abused as a child starts a support group for the abused. A man allows God to use his chronic bout with cancer to lead to his witness at the chemotherapy ward. Another sees unemployment lines as a chance to encourage some very discouraged people. A fourth describes her participation in the Alcoholics Anonymous support group as her opportunity to struggle together with people so that they can know God's

forgiving grace.

A mentally ill relative, an unresolved relationship, digging out from a mountain of debt, or <name **your** pain here> all can take on new meaning when we pray, “Lord, use my pain. Do something good in the lives of others through this chronic condition.”

GET THE LONG-TERM VIEW

The struggle through chronic pain can also point us to eternity and God’s eternal purposes. God allows chronic pain to remind us that heaven, in Joni Eareckson Tada’s words, is the “heart’s true home.”

In his suffering laden second letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes,

“Therefore, we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen but what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (II Corinthians 4:16-18).

For Paul, who was familiar with a variety of this life’s “prisons,” suffering made him anticipate heaven – “For to me, to live is

Christ and to die is gain”, he wrote from prison (Philippians 1:21). His temporal sufferings only confirmed that his true and lasting citizenship is heaven (Philippians 3:20). And Paul’s testimony serves only to remind us of the example of Jesus himself who, **“for the joy set before him** endured the cross” (Hebrews 12:3).

Is it possible that we who live in the affluent, comfort-oriented Western world have lost this eternal vision? Have we grown so attached to this world that we forget to anticipate eternity? Do we react strongly to chronic prisons in any form because we erroneously think that life ought to be carefree, easy and fun? Do we easily forget that “life is pain”, a loose translation of one of Jesus’ farewell promises: “In this world you will have trouble” (John 16:33)?

The “Spirituals”, written by people living under oppression and true slavery, reflected an anticipation of heaven, and this anticipation helped them endure the hardships of the day. They lived based on the entirety of John 16:33: “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” As a result, they sang their way through their captivity.

Soon we be over w’id the troubles of the world, the troubles of the world, the troubles of the world.

Soon we be over w’id the troubles of the world; we’re going to go and live with God.

No more weeping and wailing

No more weeping and wailing

No more weeping and wailing, we're going to go and live with God.

Some might object that the anticipation and hope of heaven provokes an “other worldly” escapism which refuses to deal with life realities and stand against injustices. Taken too far, I suppose that’s true, but in modern, Western Christianity, I fear that we’re not at that extreme. Instead, we’re trying to find all our happiness and comfort now. We approach God like a heavenly ATM machine, hoping that if we punch in the right code, affluence, health, and happiness will pour out.

The Bible witnesses to a very different view of life. God allows the prisons of our lives to remind us that this world is not all that there is.

In Joni Eareckson Tada’s book, Heaven: the Hearts True Home, she anticipates a future free from the bondage of her wheelchair. The thought of running and jumping towards Jesus helps her endure the hardships of today. The book of Revelation, written to Christians suffering under relentless persecution, encouraged the believers to stay faithful because the day was coming when God would wipe away every tear (Revelation 21:4).

WHEN PRISON COMES

No one prays for chronic pain (if you do, you need to seek counsel!). When chronic, inescapable pain comes, we begin by asking God for healing and deliverance. But if he chooses not to relieve the pain as we desire, then ask God for grace to find his redemptive purposes. If he doesn't heal, then at least ask him to help you make sense of the pain – to give pain a redemptive purpose.

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