

FINDING PURPOSE BEHIND THE PAIN

By Jim Langley

Someone once made the observation, "I wouldn't mind pain if it didn't hurt so much!" We can all relate to that. For some time now I have been dealing with sharp pain shooting down my right leg, excruciating at times. It is amazing how a slight narrowing of discs in the spine can cause so much discomfort.

Of course, pain comes in many packages, not just physical. And it keeps recurring in all of our lives. Whatever form it takes, pain can easily lead to despair and feeling debilitated, and distract us from the enjoyment of everyday life.

Many women have experienced the pain associated with childbirth. One of my friends has been through eight knee surgeries. Pain can take the form of mental anguish. PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) is just one example, whether for a soldier who has experienced great trauma on the battlefield, emergency workers that have witnessed firsthand the pain of human suffering and death, or individuals who have endured great abuse in their personal lives. There is the pain suffered by people afflicted by many types of addiction. The pain of emotional depression can leave a person with feelings of hopelessness.

And for those of us in the workplace, there is no shortage of pain: Unrealized goals and aspirations; job terminations; failed businesses; lost clients and sales contracts; not receiving promotions or pay raises we thought were well-deserved; financial hardships, including bankruptcy; or dealing with unreasonable people at work, including employers, bosses and coworkers.

There are many options for dealing with pain. We can medicate it. We can ignore it, stuffing it inside and refusing to acknowledge it, often to our long-term detriment. We can become obsessed with pursuits that help us forget our pain temporarily. Sadly, we occasionally hear of people who decide to escape the pain by taking their own lives. None of these approaches, of course, can truly resolve the problem of pain. Often they create more pain for those close to us to endure.

Fortunately, I have discovered one way to deal with pain that without fail can help us get a positive handle on whatever forms that pain and adversity take in our lives!

For me, it always starts with prayer and realizing God has a purpose in whatever I'm going through, even if He chooses not to let me know what His purpose might be. In Jeremiah 29:11, God states, "For I know the plans I have for you...plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." Even when we do not understand the reason for the pain we endure, we can trust God is fully aware of it and will use it for His eternal purposes – and for our good.

Experience has taught me that I also need to trust He is in control, continuing to work at transforming me more and more into the image of His Son. The saying, "No pain, no gain!" cannot be found in the Bible, but there is much truth found in that short phrase. I believe with the pains of life we can and will find much to gain, if we are willing to wait for and expect it. As it states in Romans 5:3, "we rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope."

As we deal with pain, our tendency is to plead for it to subside, but often it does not. Perhaps it would pass faster if we would learn from it more quickly, but even when it persists, we can find confidence in the assurance the apostle Paul had when he observed, "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness'" (2 Corinthians 12:8-9). With this perspective we can pray. "Lord, I humbly admit that Your grace is sufficient for this follower of Christ."

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Reflection/Discussion Questions

1. What is your typical reaction when you experience pain in your life, personally or professionally, in whatever form it may take?

2. Should we simply shrug our shoulders and accept that pain – hardship, adversity and the difficulties of dealing with life's struggles – is just a part of life and there is nothing we can do about it? Explain your answer.

3. What do you think of the idea that God has a purpose behind our pain, whatever it might be? How do you feel when you cannot discern what that purpose could possibly be?

4. Stating it in your own words, what does it mean when God declares, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness?"
Do you believe this? Why or why not?

NOTE: If you would like to look at or discuss other portions of the Bible that relate to this topic, consider the following passages: Job 42:1-6; Job 42:10; 2 Corinthians 12:7-10; Philippians 1:20; James 4:5-7