When Life Hurts

Today we are going to talk about something we all share—painful problems. The Christian life will sometimes be painful and full of problems. The Scriptures are filled with the painful troubles that follow God’s saints. Ask Abel; his blood still cries from the earth where it splashed as a wicked brother murdered him in the first religious war. Abel was a man of simple faith, and Cain the murderer was a man of human achievement. Or you may wish to listen to Enoch about how painfully hard it was to walk all alone with God when the whole world was not. You might hear the voice of Noah rising above the hostile crowd who pressured and pestered him for 120 years as he obeyed God even when no one else in the world listened, believed, or even cared.

Then there is Abraham who left all his loved ones and culture behind to follow God. He wandered in the desert and lived in a tent awaiting a son whom it seemed would never come. Once his promised son arrived, he nearly had to kill that son as an offering to God. Jacob wrestled with God and was crippled. Joseph fled sin, and yet God let him be falsely accused, chained, and injured. Dinah, a modest young woman in the family tree of the Messiah, was kidnapped and raped. Being in God’s family does not mean a life of leisure.

We could look at Moses who chose to follow God and yet lost everything, was hunted as a criminal, mocked by his own people, belittled by his wife, and nearly stoned to death by the rebellious people of God. David, the man after God’s own heart, was betrayed by friends, pursued by foes, wracked with depression, attacked by his own wife, nearly murdered by his father-in-law, and hunted like an animal. Later he would be chased out of town and have his throne usurped as life-long friends deserted him for a rival kingdom led by his eldest son. All this was happening while he was writing some of the sweetest portions of God’s Word and singing songs of highest worship to God.

Following David came the prophets who were unheeded, mocked, and killed. They wept and went on without a single visible sign that anyone was listening. They were dragged off by enemy armies; thrown into wretched, muddy pits by their own people; and one was eventually sawn in half by an angry king. Standing alone these mouthpieces for the Lord were faithful, but by all visible signs they were failures.

The New Testament follows the same pattern. The greatest man ever born was mocked, imprisoned, forgotten, and then silenced by beheading in a dark dungeon as a party favor for a drunken, iniquitous, go-go dancer’s mother. The Owner of the Universe visited His own, and they received Him not. Instead they reviled and mocked Him, calling Him a drunken, illegitimate, demonized fake. They tried to stone Him, push Him off steep cliffs, and interrupt His ministry. Finally after infiltrating the very inner circle of His earthly family, His enemies set up a murderous kidnapping plan that worked, and the Lamb of God was slain for the very sinful ones that killed Him.

After the Crucifixion things only continued to deteriorate. The apostles were imprisoned, roughed up, beaten, and harassed nearly fifty times in the book of Acts alone. Doubtlessly there were many more times as those were only the recorded incidents. In the end all of the apostolic band were hunted down and either crucified, beheaded, shot through with arrows, or skinned alive. Only one survived his execution attempt. John was boiled in oil and lived to go on for Jesus in exile on a barren prison
colony island called Patmos. There he wrote the last Word from God that promises only more of the same to the end of the world. The Christian life will sometimes be painful and full of problems.

So with all that in mind look at James 1:1–12. What did James write as the opening chapter to God’s New Covenant people? Simply this: a clear and simple way of life that reflects a maturing walk of faith. As Christ was received by faith, so the way of life flowing from His presence would be reflected in the walk of faith. James gives twelve clear indicators of how this walk of faith should be. These are the marks of Christian maturity.

The Truth About Your Pain, Problems, and Trials

The first mark of Christian maturity is that a maturing walk of faith endures troubles. This morning it is time to remind ourselves of the truth God has given us about painful problems and trials. In our world today, we are under an avalanche of pain reliever, pain stopper, and pain killer commercials. Aspirin, Tylenol, ibuprofen, and now naproxen all promise to instantly stop our pain. Life seems to be one gigantic headache from the advertising perspective.

The fact is pain and problems are part of life. To never have any pain in your life is to be inhuman. If you are a human being, you have physical pain, you have emotional pain, and you have spiritual pain. The eminent psychologist Scott Peck said this, “Fearing the pain involved, almost all of us, to a greater or lesser degree, attempt to avoid problems. We procrastinate hoping they will go away. We ignore them, forget them, pretend they do not exist. . . . We attempt to get out of them rather than suffer through them. . . . This tendency to avoid problems and the emotional suffering inherent in them is the primary basis of all human mental illness.” Thus the desire and attempt to avoid pain and face our problems is actually the cause for much of our suffering. Now the fact is God does not want you to ignore or avoid your pain. He wants you to discover the cause so you can find real relief.

God wants us to know something very clearly: Pain is a tool He uses to develop His good plan in our lives. In fact, Jesus said, “You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand” (John 13:7 NIV, emphasis added). If we can not see the purpose for our pain, we will struggle with it. When we see His purpose, we grow and mature! So, this morning, look with me at what God says about pain. There are five ways God uses painful problems and trials for good in your life.

God Uses Painful Problems and Trials to Goad or Push Me.

That word goad or push means to motivate. It means to spur into action. Pain is an incredible motivator. Most people will not go to the dentist until the pain drives them there. You have heard it said many times, “We don’t change when we see the light, we change when we feel the heat.” God’s Word says, “Sometimes it takes a painful experience to make us change our ways” (Proverbs 20:30 GNT). Isn’t that how we are? Pain pushes, prods, and forces us to do things that lead to change.

Usually it is when we hit bottom that we are finally ready to change. The Prodigal Son portrays that example for us in Luke 15:14–18: “He spent everything he had. . . . He wished he could fill himself with the bean pods the pigs ate, but no one gave him
anything to eat. At last he came to his senses and said, ‘... I will get up and go to my father and say, “Father, I have sinned against God and against you”’ (GNT). The hunger pains finally motivated him to move. God uses painful problems and trials to motivate us and to goad or push us. We would rarely change if we did not have any pain in our lives.

God Uses Painful Problems and Trials to Guide or Navigate Me.

Like a bit in a horse’s mouth, God takes pain and uses it to turn us in a different direction. The Psalmist writes, “It [affliction] was the best thing that could have happened to me, for it taught me to pay attention to your laws” (Psalm 119:71 TLB). Has God ever gotten your attention through pain? It is loud and clear isn’t it? God whispers through pleasure but shouts to us in pain. Even little pains can steer us if we let them.

Thousands of years ago Aristotle said, “We cannot learn without pain.” The longer we live the more we see that the person who has never suffered really knows nothing. It is hard to be around people who have never had any pain in their lives. They are phony. They are fake. They are superficial. They think everything is so easy. It isn’t. In fact, I would say that the greatest insights in life are found when I am in the midst of pain. Some things you only learn through pain. In the past fourteen years as a couple we have spent many sleepless nights in tears—tears for ruined marriages, tears for wayward children, tears for hardened hearts, tears for lost and dying friends, tears for beloved ones dying in pain, and so forth.

God goads or pushes us, but He also guides or navigates us with the pain that we have in our lives. Through it all we never need to doubt God’s love. His motive behind all of the pain is His glory and our good.

God Uses Painful Problems to Gauge or Measure Me.

God uses painful problems and trials not only to goad or push me and guide or navigate me, but He uses them to gauge or measure me. In other words, pain is a measuring tool. God uses painful problems and trials to make us see what we are really like inside. When I experience pain, the way I react to it measures my faith. My commitments, maturity, and patience can be measured by how I react to pain. People are like tea bags—you don’t know what is inside them until you drop them in hot water. Likewise, you really don’t know what is inside you until you have faced the test of pain.

Scripture says that pain is a refining fire. God wants to refine the impurities of our lives. He wants the dross and chaff removed. Ask yourself, when emotional or physical pain hit this week what area was God wanting to refine? If you let it, pain will burn off selfishness. It will burn off materialism—the grip of having to have things really does not matter when you are in pain. Pain is a great refiner of ego and pride—pain pops that ego balloon really quickly. It will burn off impatience. So many things happen when we let God refine us!

God tells us His plan: “I have tested you in the furnace of affliction” (Isaiah 48:10 NIV). When pain hits each time it is a test. Why? Because we can not keep up our image when we are in pain. In everyday life we have our schedule just right, our clothes, hair, makeup, and composure just right. Reality hits when we just have the flu for three days.
We are no longer interested in appearance and the other things that seemed so important.

Pain tests our character. Character matters so much more than appearance, but we spend so much time on what we look like and so little time on our character! You can say one thing, but pain reveals who you really are. Look at this verse: “Consider it a sheer gift, friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides. You know that under pressure, your faith-life is forced into the open and shows its true colors” (James 1:2–3 The Message). Pain puts the squeeze on us and lets out what is really inside.

The classic example is the exodus of Israel from Egypt. The Lord turned a two-week walk from Egypt to Canaan into a forty-year test. Why? To show them what was inside their hearts. He was goading or pushing them, He was guiding them, and He was gauging them. Notice this verse: “God led you through the wilderness for forty years, humbling you and testing you to find out how you would respond, and whether or not you would really obey him” (Deuteronomy 8:2 TLB).

Are you in the wilderness this week? In the wilderness things dry up. Are your finances drying up? Are your relationships drying up? Is your health withering? Is your ministry drying up? God says, “I am testing you. I am gauging you so you will know what is in your heart.”

**God Uses Painful Problems and Trials to Guard or Protect Me.**

Sometimes God uses painful problems and trials to protect us from something far worse. Sometimes He uses pain to protect us and prevent us from getting involved in something that we should not be involved in. God uses pain to guard or protect us.

Pain can be a blessing in disguise. Fever in our bodies is a good example. An infection triggers a fever to warn us a battle is going on. If we never had the fever an infection could take over and even kill us. Pain is a gift from God to warn, correct, and guide our bodies as well as our souls.

Painful emotions say something is out of kilter in our lives. Every time we feel anger, resentment, bitterness, hostility, worry, apathy, or depression, it is God shouting to us that something is out of whack and out of balance. God is saying, “I want you to get this corrected.” The emotions are just the fever pointing to the infection.

One of the most beautiful illustrations in the Scriptures is the life of Joseph. At first his life is like a horror story. He is hated by his family, nearly killed by his brothers, sold as a slave, accused of rape, cruelly treated in prison, and left alone and forgotten—all unjustly. Enough happened to Joseph to say he was abused at work, at home, socially, and mentally. Yet God turned it all around. Joseph rose to become Prime Minister of Egypt. He saved not only Egypt from starvation but also God’s chosen people! What did he have to say about all this? Listen to his own words that he said to the very ones who hurt him: “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good” (Genesis 50:20 NIV).

Now let’s review something. There are obviously people in your life who mean to harm you. They may have harmed you as a child. They may be harming you right now emotionally, physically, or in some other way. They are out to harm you, and it hurts.
However, God says, “I have a plan and purpose bigger than this. They mean it for bad, but I mean it for good.”

All along in Joseph’s life God was guarding, guiding, goad, and gauging Joseph for greatness because there is no greatness without pain. Because of this Joseph was able to say, “You meant it for bad, but God meant it for good; He was guarding me.” Later on in his life he had two sons, and he named them Manasseh and Ephraim. In Hebrew Manasseh means “God made me to forget” while Ephraim means “God made me fruitful or successful.”

So after forty years of pain, Joseph could say, “God has blessed me so much, and I can see the picture clearer now, that it has made me forget all of that pain from my childhood. He has made me successful now.” This morning that is exactly what God wants to do in your life.

**God Uses Painful Problems and Trials to Grow or Nurture Me.**

Pain is God’s path to maturity. Margaret Clarkson has written a book called *Grace Grows Best in Winter*. I love that title. It is possible to grow spiritually and emotionally during bright, healthy, cheerful, sunny days of summer when everything is going great and life is fantastic. Sure you can grow or nurture in that, but you grow or nurture far faster and far deeper in the dark phases of the soul. You grow or nurture far deeper and far greater in the valleys than on the mountain tops. This is the way God created us.

I could show a stack of letters from the last twenty years in ministry from people who have written me and said, “Pastor, I’ve had the toughest time of my life, but I have to say that . . .

. . . I’ve grown more through this separation than at any other time in my life.”

. . . I’ve grown more through this unemployment than at any other time in my life.”

. . . I’ve grown more through this loss of a loved one than at any other time in my life.”

. . . I’ve grown more through this illness than at any other time in my life.”

. . . I’ve grown more through this crisis than at any other time in my life.”

. . . I’ve grown more through this loneliness than at any other time in my life.”

Because grace grows or nurtures best in winter, God uses painful problems and trials to grow or nurture me. “For when the way is rough, your patience has a chance to grow. So let it grow, and do not try to squirm out of your problems . . . then you will be ready for anything, strong in character, full and complete” (James 1:4 TLB).

Pain is the high cost of growth. The saying is trite, but it is true: “There is no gain without pain.” Growth often does not come any other way. There are no five easy steps to the wonderful life. The fact is we often want the product without the process. We want the maturity, we want the emotional stability, we want the health and wholeness, we want the confidence and the meaning and significance and purpose of life. Yet we do not want the process of pain, suffering, and tough times. You can not short circuit it. Look at
what The Message says, “So don’t try to get out of anything prematurely. Let it do its work so you become mature and well developed, not deficient in any way” (James 1:4). If I were to summarize everything I want to say to you about this, it would be this: The very thing that discourages you the most God uses to develop you; it is not an accident.

The best known part of the Bible is probably the Psalms. Most of them were written by a man who faced more pain than we can imagine. David was rejected by his family, unloved by his father who would not even invite him in for special family times, left alone for long periods to do family chores, and ignored even when great events happened in his life. Yet out of those and even more trying times came the Psalms! The Apostle Paul was able to talk about the pain he experienced in this way: “Yet we believe now that we had this experience of coming to the end of our tether that we might learn to trust, not in ourselves, but in God . . .” (2 Corinthians 1:9 Phillips). You see, you really do not know that Jesus Christ is all you need until Jesus Christ is all you have.

A living example of this truth was a dear friend who was tortured by cancer until her death. She was my personal secretary at our ministry in New England. Her name was Doris Kornfield. Piece by piece cancer ravaged her body. Her hair went and her body was emaciated surgery by surgery, radiation by radiation, chemo by chemo, but her smile never left.

The last day I saw her on earth she was propped up by the copy machine trying to hold her hand still long enough to push the copy button one last time as she ran off the bulletins for Sunday. Cancer had stolen the muscles to hold her head up so she felt for the button and pushed it. Then with a smile of triumph she let us lead her to the car where her loving and loyal husband of forty-five years drove her home. She never got out of bed that night until she stepped upon the shores of Glory.

Only Jesus Christ can give that kind of courage and that kind of peace of mind in spite of enormous pain. Doesn’t that make some of your complaints seem a little puny? Your pain, however, matters to God. He hurts with you, and He cares about you. “I love the LORD, because He has heard my voice and my supplications; He heard me cry for mercy. Because He has inclined His ear to me, therefore I will call upon Him as long as I live. The pains of death surround me, and the pangs of Sheol laid hold of me; I found trouble and sorrow. Gracious is the LORD, and righteous; yes, our God is merciful. The LORD preserves the simple; I was brought low, and He saved me” (Psalm 116:1–3, 5–6).

Pain never leaves you where it finds you; it always moves you. My question to you is where are you allowing your pain to move you? Don’t waste your hurt; don’t waste your pain: “Has all your painful experience brought you nowhere?” (Galatians 3:4 Phillips).

Pain turns some people into saints, but it turns other people into devils. It makes some people bitter, but it makes some people better. The choice is yours. Barbara Johnson says, “Pain is inevitable, it’s a part of life, but misery is optional.” If you let your hurts, emotional, physical, and spiritual, lead you into a relationship with Christ and to know Him, then you will be able to say like Paul said in 2 Corinthians 7:9, “Now I am glad not because it hurt you, but because the pain turned you to God” (TLB).

My plea to you today is that you will give your hurt and your heart to Jesus Christ, the Great Physician. First Peter 4:19 says, “If you are suffering according to God’s
will, keep on doing what is right and trust yourself to the God who made you, for he will never fail you” (TLB). He will never fail you—you can not say that about anybody else!

I want to encourage you to conduct a little self-evaluation. Think of the hurt that you are going through and the pain that you are going through, and ask yourself:

- Is God using this to goad or push me, to motivate me into action, to do something I know I ought to be doing anyway?
- Is God using this pain to guide or navigate me, to point me in a new direction?
- Is God using this pain to gauge or measure me, to help me measure myself and see what I am really like on the inside and see what needs to be changed? Is it a warning light that something is out of kilter?
- Is God using this pain to guard me, to protect me from something worse, to keep me from wandering too far, and to keep me dependent upon Him?
- Is God using this pain to grow or nurture me and to make me more like His Son Jesus Christ?

Now why don’t you talk to God about your pain? You could say something like this: Dear God, would You help me with my hurt? Thank You that it matters to You. Thank You that You love me and that I matter to You. Thank You that You sent Your Son, Jesus Christ, for my sake, not to explain my pain away but to walk through it with me. Today, dear Jesus, I ask You to take every part of my life, especially the part that hurts, and use it for good in my life. Help me to walk through this. I want to trust You, and I want to know You. In Your name I pray. Amen.


2 Barbara Johnson, _Stick a Geranium in Your Hat and Be Happy_, (Thomas Nelson, Inc. 1995).