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Pain: Emotionally Speaking

By Dr. Luke Tse

I came across this desperate remark while browsing through a Web site: “I wish I could say that I believe in Jesus Christ, that He loves me and cares, but I no longer believe that. From a mother who is vicious and has wrecked my adoptive family to the death of my adoptive brother, I no longer believe. I even find myself wondering if God really exists. I look around at all the Christians who say that they help people who don’t know how to ask for it, but they have not even noticed my pain. If God loved or cared for me, He’d at least help, wouldn’t He? But no help has come! Why? God doesn’t love me!”

I was struck by this woman’s desperate utterance and intense cry for help. I agonized profoundly over her acute sense of loneliness and of my inability to offer any solace to her in that moment. The depth of her pain troubled me.

Pain. While pain is most commonly associated with a physical sensation, it is also a subjective feeling of stress or hurt that can be as uniquely experienced and qualified as each individual is unique. And, while physical wounds might be more easily bound and treated, psychological and emotional injuries could go beyond the reach of medication and be longer-lasting in their devastating effects than physical scars.

Psychologists and counselors have given much attention to the grieving process. Because grief is one of the many facets of pain, the general response to any subjective experience of pain is similar. The first impulse to a hurtful event or experience is typically one of shock. At this stage, the response is exhibited by what is commonly referred to as “fight or flight.” It is the most immediate reaction to a situation or event, in which people might either be stunned into action or inaction. Once the shockwave has passed, a sense of denial — e.g., “this is not happening” — can overtake the person. When the mind is able to regain its mental bearing, a feeling of infuriation arises. Anger is a powerful emotion that can energize a person to do something about a situation. However, when corrective actions are thwarted, inadequate, or impossible, anger can quickly turn to desperation or despair. The course of this psychological and emotional conflict can be a drawn-out one in which numerous attempts could be made to remedy a situation or alleviate a hurt. At some point, anger is transposed into bargaining, particularly with God (for example, “God, if you’ll do this, I promise I will ...”). Finally, depending upon a number of variables, an individual can learn to accept the outcome, adapt to an altered course of living, or give in to resentment.

Pain exposes humanity’s frailty and fallibility, and a positive response to pain compels us to seek help while a negative response to pain can drive us to blame or lash out at others. We are not good at taking proper care of ourselves and, at

times, we are even the cause of someone else’s agony. It is arguable whether pain, in itself, does anything good. From a spiritual standpoint, the presence, and even necessity, of pain and suffering is recognized: it came, in part, as a punishment for sin (Genesis 3:16-19), and it is integral to the actions of forgiveness or remission of sin (Hebrews 9:22). In some settings, the acceptance of pain is an indispensable part of one’s occupation or advancement. Intense athletic training and combat training are two examples that come to mind. Philip Yancey, in his book *Where is God When it Hurts?*, effectively reminded us, as do many physicians, that pain is crucial for the preservation of life. For example, how would we know to withdraw from the dangers of fire were it not for the pain alarms



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embedded in our sensory organs? Ideally, of course, we would not have to feel any pain if we could not be burned. Unfortunately, that is not our present reality.

When pain enters our lives, we must be as honest about our feelings when expressing them to God as, for example, was David. The book of Psalms is rich with David's emotional outpourings to God. His intensely candid expressions were part of his worship, not his lashing out at God.

God presents Himself as the supreme Helper and Healer. But like the Great Parent that He is, God encourages His children to learn to help one another as He has helped us. Unfortunately, when troubles arise, too often we exhibit the same tendencies as Job's friends to seek out fault, to question one's faith, or to overemphasize justice. It is without a doubt that God could have changed the world without ever having to step beyond the throne room of heaven. Yet He chose to come into our existence and allowed Himself to be physically touched by stained humanity. Because Jesus completely participated in our suffering, we are able to understand relief and can have our hope vividly pinned upon His promise of eternal joy! John Stott said, "He laid aside His immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us. Our sufferings become more manageable in the light of His" (*The Cross of Christ*). Following the example of His Son, Jesus Christ, God desires for us to not step away from being personally burdened by another person's troubles or even to hide our own sense of inadequacies to respond. As God so entered into our suffering, we are to enter into one another's suffering and grow together in the process.

Until Jesus comes again, our journey in the meantime needs to be one that is marked by a proactive participation in the burden-sharing and mutually-supporting way of life. No one is free from pain, and we should not be so mistaken as to think that nothing beyond "God-and-I" can handle everything. If it were so, Jesus might not have emphasized the importance and similarity of the second greatest commandment to the first (Matthew 22:35-40). Rather, we should re-orient ourselves to the same mindset as

God, "who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (II Corinthians 5:18). Those who are spiritual are to restore those in sin in a spirit of gentleness and to bear another's burden (Galatians 6:1-2). To "rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn" (Romans 12:15) — such is the shared journey of life.

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Dr. Luke Tse is assistant professor of psychology at Cedarville University. He was born in Nanjing, China, and lived in Hong Kong and Singapore before immigrating to the United States at the age of 18. Prior to coming to Cedarville with his wife, Linda, in 2001, he earned his master of divinity and Ph.D. degrees from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and served as a pastor in Louisiana. Luke also serves as one of the counselors at Christian Counseling Associates in Huber Heights, Ohio.