

Seeing Suffering Differently

Press On Series, September 26/27 | Philippians 1:12-18 (See also Acts 16:16-40)

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CAN GOOD COME FROM PAIN?

Hedonism teaches that pain is bad.

It's pretty easy to confuse hedonism with debauchery. Debauchery is indulging in particular pleasures extremely and excessively. Debauchery leads to all kinds of danger.

Hedonism isn't debauchery. Yes, it's pursuing pleasure. However, the philosophers who described a hedonistic lifestyle in the ancient world typically counseled moderation so that pleasure would actually be pleasure and not lead to pain.

Hedonism actually teaches that we should pursue the biggest amount of the best kinds of pleasure for the most people. That idea sounds good.

On the flip side, hedonism implies that we should avoid pain. Pain seems like the opposite of pleasure, so we should avoid pain when possible to maximize pleasure. Pain is bad.

The Bible also teaches us that pain is not inherently good.

The Bible definitely acknowledges that pain is real. The Bible recounts multiple times when people suffered deeply and cried out to God for deliverance.

While the Bible acknowledges that pain is real, it is also clear that pain only entered the world because of sin. Check out Genesis 3 for details.

However, the Bible does add that pain is not part of the future God is planning. Revelation 21:4 promises,

He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.

If pain will be gone someday, then it can't be inherently good.

Let's be real for a moment. Pain can stop us from doing many things.

We may not be committed hedonists, but we do like pleasure, and we don't like pain.

If we know that something is going to make us happy, we're more likely to do it.

And if we know that something is going to hurt, then we're less likely to start.

And if we start doing something and discover that it hurts, we're more likely to quit.

Pain can stop us in our tracks.

So let me ask you a very practical question today. Should I get a flu shot?

For just a minute today, let's set aside all arguments about the safety, effectiveness, and appropriateness of vaccinations. Okay?

Today—for just a moment—let's boil this down to a question about pain.

If pain is bad and should be avoided at all costs, then I shouldn't get a flu shot. Because it's going to hurt. Just a little bit.

But if I don't get the flu shot, then I am more likely to get flu this season. And if I get the flu, that's going to hurt. A lot. I'll be sick for days or weeks, and I might make other people sick.

If I get the shot, it might be painful now, but it will help me avoid more pain later.

That thought raises a question...

Can good come from pain?

It's an important question with big implications!

None of us likes pain, but if we always avoid pain, we might miss out on something better!

Paul talked about his own pain in Philippians chapter 1. Paul knew pain, so we can benefit from his understanding and insights. And we want to know what he says to us on behalf of God about pain.

However, before we dig in, we have to go back to the founding of the church in Philippi, recorded in Acts 16, for context.

PAIN SERVED A PURPOSE YEARS EARLIER IN PHILIPPI.

Let's remember the context in Acts 16.

On his second missionary journey, Paul had recently arrived in Philippi along with a team consisting of Silas, Timothy, and Luke, at least.

They went to a prayer meeting consisting of a few Jewish women and at least one God-fearing Gentile woman named Lydia. She heard the Gospel and became a Christian along with her entire household. Then she invited Paul and his team to make her home their base of operations. The church in Philippi was born.

Then things became much more difficult.

First, pain produced freedom for a demon-possessed slave girl.

Paul and the team kept going to the place of prayer on the Sabbath Day.

One time they were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination. The Bible actually says that she was possessed by the Spirit of Pythona. That sounds like python, doesn't it? It should. The python was a symbol of the Greek god Apollo. Among other things, Apollo was the god who supposedly gave mortals messages about the future. This woman was possessed by a demon that purported to speak for Apollo.

When the spirit possessed her, Acts 16 indicates that she would become "mantic." She would fall into a trance, engage in frenetic behavior, and give messages about the future. People paid her owners money for her to tell their fortunes. It would have been big business.

This slave girl harassed Paul and the team. She followed them around, saying that they were servants of the Most High God who showed the way to salvation. She did it for so long that she frustrated Paul who turned to her and ordered the spirit to come out of her.

The spirit left her, and she was freed from its influence on the spot.

The pain of being harassed led to this slave girl's finding spiritual freedom. That, however, produced more pain.

Pain enabled prisoners to hear the gospel.

The slave girl's owners were not happy about what had happened. They quickly realized that their slave could no longer tell the future. Their business was done, and they were furious.

They grabbed Paul and Silas and took them into the marketplace in town to make charges against them before the officials.

They went to the court on the northwest side of the Agora or Forum.

The slave girl's owners brought charges.

First, they identified Paul and Silas as Jews. The people of Philippi didn't know many Jews, so they were naturally suspicious.

Then they appealed to the magistrates. They said that Paul and Silas were undermining public order and throwing the city into chaos.

Then they inflamed the crowd by saying that these men were dangerous and advocated customs that were "un-Roman." The patriotic crowd was furious.

Without an investigation, the magistrates turned Paul and Silas over to the lictors—their enforcers—who beat Paul and Silas.

After the beating, the magistrates took Paul and Silas to the nearby jail and ordered the jailer to take special care of them. The jailer put them in the inner dungeon in the stockade.

You might think that this would break the spirits of the missionaries, but it didn't. They were grateful for the chance to suffer for Jesus, who had suffered for them.

In the middle of the night, they sang and praised God. They prayed.

The other prisoners in the jail overheard it all. Clearly, they were impacted by what they heard.

Sometime around midnight, there was an earthquake. It was violent, but it seems to have been limited to the jail and the area around the jail.

This earthquake forced open the door to the jail and loosened the bonds on every prisoner.

If you've read the Bible, you know how you expect the story to end. You expect that Paul and Silas would have walked out free men by the power of God, but they didn't. Instead, Paul and Silas stayed put. And somehow they persuaded all the other prisoners to stay put.

Clearly, the pain Paul and Silas had been through had reached these prisoners and changed their lives. And clearly, they were willing to do whatever Paul and Silas said, because they fought the natural desire to escape whatever punishment was coming their way. They stayed put. Pain led to their hearing the Gospel with life-changing impact.

Next, pain gave the jailer and his family an opportunity to accept Christ.

The jailer heard the turmoil and came from his home to see what had happened.

Seeing the doors open, he assumed the prisoners had all escaped.

He knew that, under the law, he would be held responsible for their escapes and that the penalty would certainly be death, given the instructions the magistrates had given about keeping these prisoners safe and locked away.

So he drew his sword and prepared to end his own life, rather than face the humiliation of a trial that would certainly also end in his death.

However, from inside the prison, Paul called out to stop his hand and say that every prisoner was still inside and accounted for.

The jailer entered the jail. Others brought lights. They found the prisoners just as Paul had said. The jailer knew that Paul was clearly an extraordinary man. He had power and truth!

He fell down before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out of the jail and asked them, "What must I do to be saved?"

That night Paul and Silas shared the Gospel with everyone in the family and they all accepted Jesus. Later—after the jailer washed Paul and Silas' wounds—they were all baptized.

Pain led to an entire family accepting Jesus!

Last, pain secured the church in Philippi.

Sometime in the night, the jailer fed Paul and Silas and returned them to jail as was his duty.

The next day, the magistrates decided that justice had been served and sent the lictors to the jail to order Paul and Silas' release.

The jailer, thinking this was good news, told Paul and Silas that they were free to go.

However, Paul told the magistrates' enforcers that they should go back and tell their bosses that they had beaten Roman citizens without a trial. Now they had a problem.

The message had its intended results. The magistrates were worried. There could be big consequences if the emperor found out that they had violated a Roman citizen's rights.

So the magistrates showed up in person to escort Paul and Silas out of jail. They apologized and asked them to leave the city.

Now the magistrates were in the debt of Paul and Silas.

Before leaving, they went to the home of Lydia, the meeting place of the church. In a sense, they put the church under their protection. If the magistrates wanted to harass the church in the future, they knew that they would do so at the cost of news reaching Rome of what they had done to two Roman citizens. The pain Paul and Silas endured secured the peace of the church in Philippi while it got organized and started to grow.

PAIN STILL SERVED A PURPOSE IN PRISON.

In Philippians 1:12-13, Paul let us know that pain probably led to astounding outcomes in Rome.

He wrote, I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.

So once again, Paul was in prison enduring pain.

In all likelihood, Paul was in prison in Rome.

That makes what he wrote here particularly important.

Paul wrote that being in prison happened in order to advance the Gospel.

Specifically, Paul's being in prison in Rome meant that a group called the imperial guard had an opportunity to hear that he was in prison not because of Jesus. What does that mean?

It means that Paul was being guarded by the emperor's elite bodyguard, the Praetorian Guard.

The Praetorian Guard protected the emperor and had other jobs. It was like the Department of Homeland Security, CIA, Secret Service, and Special Forces all rolled into one.

The Praetorian Guard was headquartered in what was still a new barracks on the eastern edge of Rome called the *castra praetoria*. Walls of the *castra praetoria* remain in Rome today.

It consisted of 5-10,000 elite soldiers in Paul's day.

They had special privileges. They were better paid, better trained, and better equipped than the regular army. The Praetorian Guard was the fast track to military and civilian leadership.

Consequently, the Praetorian Guard drew from some of the best placed and most ambitious sons of the Empire in Paul's day.

Now, remember what Paul said? Paul said that the entire Praetorian Guard had at least been exposed to the Gospel! All because of Paul's pain.

Don't miss the significance! People were becoming followers of Jesus as a result, people in high places. Now read Philippians 4:22. It says,

All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household.

The Praetorian Guard had easy access to the highest civilian officials in Caesar's household. And even the servants of the Emperor were becoming Christians. Wow! That's the future unfolding in front of us! Let that sink in!

Paul added in Philippians 1:14 that his pain helped some Christians find the courage to speak.

And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

The term, "the brothers," probably means other missionary/apostolic leaders like Paul.

Paul argued that, seeing him in prison had inspired the other brothers to become bolder in their own preaching. Paul's steadfastness in the face of pain convinced them that they could face whatever pain came their way because of speaking about Jesus.

However, Paul explored an exquisite and unexpected form of pain in Philippians 1:15-17.

Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.

While Paul referred to all of these missionary/apostolic leaders as his brothers, they did not all think fondly of him.

Paul knew that most of his brothers loved him and loved God. He knew that they were preaching out of love and out of a desire to share the Gospel.

But he also knew that some of his "brothers" actually considered themselves his rivals. They were envious of Paul's abilities and successes. They were motivated as much by their own selfish ambitions as they were by seeing the Gospel thrive.

Paul's rivals were inspired by his imprisonment to preach, because they thought that their own success would cause Paul more pain while he was in prison.

Paul really rose above it all in the next verse in big ways.

In Philippians 1:18 he affirmed that even that kind of pain could have a purpose.

What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.

If Paul's rivals thought that their preaching would bring Paul even more pain while in prison, then Paul said, "Bring it on."

Pain is worth it as long as the Gospel is preached, and the Kingdom expands.

PAUL WANTED TO CHANGE MINDS ABOUT PAIN.

Paul was sharing his way of thinking about some kinds of pain.

It's important to realize that Paul expected pain. He knew that Jesus experienced great pain. He assumed that, if Jesus experienced great pain, his disciples would as well.

However, Paul saw that pain could have a purpose. When Paul endured pain, he repeatedly gave the glory to God, because he could see that God was doing something to build up Paul and the Kingdom of God.

He knew his pain served God's purposes. That's why Paul could endure pain and press on!

Paul wanted the Christians in Philippi to see his own pain from his way of thinking.

They had already heard about Paul's pain. They knew he was in prison. They knew what that was like. And they knew why.

He didn't want them to focus on the suffering but instead on what that suffering was accomplishing and on the glory of God!

He also wanted them to see their own pain (past, present and future) from a new point of view.

They were facing difficulties in Philippi.

The legal cover Paul and Silas provided for them with the magistrates years earlier had worn off, and the people of Philippi looked at the Christians fundamentally as un-Roman.

The consequences were mounting when Paul wrote his letter to them.

And in the days to come, Paul knew that, as the consequences increased, they would all need to demonstrate what they thought about pain. If pain was something simply to be avoided at all costs, then they would quit one after the other.

Instead, Paul wanted them to see that pain could have a purpose and press on!

By extension, Paul wants US to see our own pain from his point of view.

As we read this letter, we can easily see the purpose behind Paul's pain. And we can admire the great apostle for enduring that pain for a greater purpose.

We can also easily see that the apostle Paul was right in telling this congregation to press on, because we know that the church in Philippi thrived for 1,000 years because they pressed on.

But this is the Bible. It's God's Word to us, and it applies to us as well. The Holy Spirit is inviting us to think again about pain and purpose and to adopt the mindset Paul is describing. Can we look at pain and purpose the way Paul did?

PAIN CAN STOP US, BUT PURPOSE HELPS US PRESS ON.

Pain can stop us.

We are culturally conditioned to avoid pain.

We hear that pain is not normal, it's unacceptable, and we have a right to live pain-free. From a certain point of view, that's a thought we appreciate. For instance, not feeling too much pain after surgery is a good thing! However, it has led to difficult places for us as a society. It has led us to what amounts to a crisis over pain medication. We have seen a massive surge in the use of pain medications in our country in past decades. That has led to a massive surge as well in the number of people abusing those pain meds. And all of that has led to tens of thousands of deaths a year. And it's all because we have a deeply ingrained thought that we have to avoid pain.

Pain can stop us, but purpose makes us reconsider pain.

Paul recognized that his own pain had purpose. Realizing that our pain can have a purpose doesn't make the pain go away. However, it can help us to think about the pain differently. Instead of thinking of pain as something that we avoid if at all possible, realizing that it can have a purpose should give us pause and prompt us to reconsider some of the assumptions we've been handed. If pain has a purpose from God, then pain doesn't have to stop us.

Pain can stop us, but purpose helps us press on.

Will we do what God wants even when there's pain, suffering, or sacrifice involved? When we encounter pain, our natural tendency is to quit. To stop. But sometimes God wants us to keep going, even when there's pain involved. Are we willing to do what God wants? Even when it hurts? We can if we look to God and remember, "I don't know what you're doing here, but I know you. And I know that you love this world. And I know that you love me. And I love you. And I trust you." If we know and remember that God has a purpose even in the pain, then it's easier to press on.