



enjoying the journey
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Five Reasons to Embrace Painful Times

What If We're Seeing It All Wrong?

When I think back to the most painful experiences of my life, both as a child and an adult, I do so with a combination of lingering hurt and growing awe. The hardest times I've experienced, whether three months or 30 years ago, still affect me greatly. For some of them, I can close my eyes and clearly remember the smallest details. For some of them, I still remember the ache in my chest and the questions in my mind. For all of them, I remember the immediate pain and the lingering effects.

Pain, in whatever form it comes, can wound us deeply and change us forever.

When I remember the pain, it's understandable to experience the lingering hurt, but why the growing awe? Simply this - **I am in awe at how the pain changed me for the better.** I am in awe at how such brokenness grew my faith, and **I am in awe at how circumstances I thought were ruining me were really making me whole.**

Pain is awe-inspiring in both the wounds it creates and the wake it leaves behind.

For many of us, the human experience is about seeking pleasure and avoiding pain. On a daily basis, we encounter people desperate to find what feels good and avoid what feels bad. We all learn very early in life to repeat what we enjoy, so we repeatedly reach into the candy jar, watch TV shows that make us laugh, and spend time with friends who bring us fun. Likewise, we learn very quickly to run from what hurts us.

We learn that hot stovetops bring us pain, so we avoid touching hot burners, just like we avoid the foods that cause us discomfort and the people who heap stinging criticism.

We mistakenly believe, however, that safety should be associated with pleasure and that danger is found in pain, so we begin a pursuit of self-preservation through pain avoidance. Safety is our goal, and in it, we assume we will avoid all pain. We wear seat belts to prevent injuries in accidents; we cool and heat our homes to avoid excessive heat and cold temperatures; we stay away from people who have caused us emotional trauma in the past. These are not wrong actions, but through them we develop the habit of running from all pain.

We learn to hate pain and to do everything we can to prevent it from occurring. If it does enter our lives, we do everything we can to get rid of it. We think of pain as an enemy. Often it is, but *sometimes it's not*.

What if pain sometimes actually has a divine purpose?

What if discomfort really offers something positive?

I'm convinced these are true. I'm convinced pain and discomfort have a greater capacity to change us than the perfect circumstances we so desperately desire. This doesn't mean we should chase after suffering or purposely place ourselves in painful situations, but this does mean we shouldn't run when hard times occur.

What Should Christians Believe about Pain?

For every Christ-follower, suffering is promised. John 16:33 says, *“In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”*

The world is not the believer’s eternal home, and it is not a place controlled by good. It is ruled by Satan, and as such, it is a place where pain is inevitable. True believers will never find absolute safety and complete comfort living on earth because we are aliens and strangers in the world (1 Peter 2:11). Sin is the way of this world, and an inescapable consequence of sin is suffering. Pain always follows rebellion from God’s ways, and since we as sinful creatures rebel every day, we will inevitably feel the pain that results.

Pain is promised.

But.

Christ does not leave us alone in our suffering, and we are not left to suffer without a purpose or without hope.

This is why it is so important that we who love God also seek Him in our pain.

What Good Can We Find in Pain?

Throughout Scripture, there are stories of people who suffered greatly even though they lived devoted to God.

Moses was separated from his family, committed a murder, and was chased into the wilderness.

Paul was imprisoned, shipwrecked, and condemned to die by decapitation.

Noah was ridiculed for building the ark.

David was pursued and wanted dead by the king.

Joseph was mistreated and left for dead by his own brothers.

Abraham was asked to sacrifice the very son he had been promised.

God's people were rejected, over and over. They were beaten, abused, and ridiculed. Imprisoned. Mocked. Abandoned.

God's people felt pain. God's chosen suffered greatly.

Their circumstances were in many ways much more difficult than what we face, yet these men are recognized in Scripture and throughout church history as people approved by God and exemplifying what a life of faith is to be. If the giants of faith did not escape suffering, it should stand to reason that we will not - *and should not* - escape hard times, either.

Some questions we should consider about these giants of the faith are: “Did their suffering *increase* their faith? Did it *allow* their usefulness in the Kingdom? Did it *cause* their unwavering devotion to God?”

We can’t wrongly assume that their faith was great **in spite of their pain** or that God allowed their suffering but did not use it for His purposes. We must acknowledge that their lives were shaped for Kingdom work largely **because of their pain**, and if this was true for them, it must be true of us, too.

Pain always - *always* - has a purpose in our lives.

In every difficult circumstance that brings us pain and suffering, there will be opportunities for good. Every situation we wish we could change is a chance for growth and an opportunity for revelation, but it all depends on our mindset and perspective through it. We can suffer miserably and just try to get through it, or we can suffer with purpose and try to see the lesson in it.

In pain, there is *always* a purpose.

Purpose #1: Pain Always Reassures Us of the Presence of God

As humans who cannot see our God, it's tempting sometimes to forget his presence. It's natural to forget He's always with us, and it's easy to wonder why we can't sense him. When life is going well and we have no real problems, we can easily allow God to drift into the backgrounds of our lives, present but forgotten. Real but uninvolved. Savior but not Lord.

In times of great hardship and pain, however, we become desperate to find the One with the answers.

We rightly see our own helplessness and are driven to seek him until we find him.

Our overwhelming need for his help makes being in his presence a true priority. We become desperate to know that our faith isn't for nothing, so we pursue God through his word and through prayer, and in our desperate pursuit, He comes ever closer. Jeremiah 29:13 reminds us that we find God only when we seek him with our whole hearts. If pain is the only way God can get our attention and the devotion of our entire hearts, then He will use it.

I don't believe God ever desires for his children to feel extreme pain, but I am confident He uses our pain to draw us back to his heart. When our lives are going well and we are comfortable with our paths, we are content with our independence. When everything is falling apart, though, we are reminded we have nothing without God. His presence becomes the only thing that matters, and his presence becomes real.

Pain reassures us that God sees us, hears us, is present in our circumstances, and is pouring out love through everything we face. Not only that, but He has already seen our pain through to the end and is not surprised at what we face. Deuteronomy 31:8 says, *“The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.”* Even in the most painful times when we feel most alone, God will never leave. He is with us always, but most especially in our hurt. And He himself knows what pain is like. Isaiah 53:3 reminds us that *“He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.”*

Though we feel alone, we are not. Though we think no one understands our pain, He does. When we're tired of suffering, He's right there with us.

Our pain is a reminder of his presence.

Purpose #2: Pain Reveals What Really Matters Most

Our times of deepest pain also tend to bring the greatest clarity to our lives. When we are abandoned, rejected, scared, or wounded, we look around at our lives and see what we were oblivious to before. We evaluate what we really need most, and we gain the wisdom to see what's really valuable: *People. Relationships. Love. Compassion.*

We are reminded in pain and loss that our money and our possessions never truly provide a sense of worth, and the frivolous ways we spend our time are actually wasting the valuable minutes of our lives. We learn to overlook minor irritations, and we begin to see our insignificant problems for what they really are.

In pain, we develop eternal eyesight, watching for and seeing what is important to eternity. We learn discernment, seeing the value in Kingdom work. We develop empathy for others, and struggling people become our kindred spirits. Our own hurts open us up to other people's pain.

In pain, we learn what matters. In hardship, we set priorities. In suffering, we begin to truly see.

Matthew 16:26 says, *"What profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?"* We can spend our entire lives in pursuit of things that do not matter for eternity, and in doing so, we can forfeit our very souls. Pain can wake us up to the reality that what we pursue is a waste and that what we value is worthless. Pain awakens us to the invisible realities we let ourselves so easily forget.

When Paul wrote to the church at Philippi, he said he wanted them to continue *“growing in knowledge and understanding. For I want you to understand what really matters, so that you may live pure and blameless lives”* (Philippians 1:10). To understand what really matters, we need a perspective shift, and pain can provide just that.

Our troubles in this life are troubling, yes, but *“our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all”* (2 Corinthians 4:17). Our pain teaches us to look to a future with Christ, not just to the present reality of this world.

Our pain reminds us of what really matters.

Purpose #3: Pain Redirects Us to the Path We Need to Take

Because Christ loves us, He gives us choices.

In our free will, we can choose to be teachers or doctors, to live in America or Australia, and to spend frivolously or save wisely. We can choose healthful eating, we can choose to remain single, and we can choose to sleep until noon.

**In every area of our lives, God allows choice.
*Including with him.***

In one of the unfathomable mysteries of life, God doesn't force us to love or follow him. He doesn't demand that we obey his commands, and He doesn't coerce us into seeking his ways. He loves us unconditionally, but He lets us decide to return that love or not.

Love gives a choice.

Since we have the ability to choose what we want, we humans often choose the paths that are easiest and the ways that are comfortable. We often choose what benefits us now, not what prepares us for eternity.

Our needs and wants are two very different things, and our choices often reflect what we *want*. We *want* immediate gratification. We *want* comfort. We *want* fun. We ignore what God wants for us, and we decide what's best for ourselves.

Sometimes what we choose for ourselves leads to trouble, and this trouble causes pain. But instead of sitting back with arms crossed saying, "I told you so," God uses the trouble and He harnesses the pain to

redirect us to where we need to be. He allows for our choice, but then uses our wrong decisions to bring us back to Himself. *God wastes nothing.*

God's redirection doesn't always come just when we've chosen comfort and ease, however. Sometimes it comes to direct us away from the choices and potential harm from others. Redirection is sometimes protection, and God will nudge us onto the path that's best for us when he knows we would never choose it for ourselves.

Our pain redirects us to where we need to be.

Purpose #4: Pain Protects Us from What We Don't See

The reality for each of us is that what we see is not all that exists. Our minds cannot comprehend the invisible realm that is all around, and our limited understanding can't grasp the influencers that shape our lives

but don't show up to our eyes. Each day, Satan and his demons wage a battle against us, but it's one we cannot see.

We don't see these powers, but we see their effects.

We don't see this evil, but we feel its power.

We are reminded in Ephesians 6:12, *“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”*

You and I are under assault by these spiritual forces we cannot see, but these forces are not unknown to God. He is not surprised by them or at their mercy, and He is always working, unbeknownst to us, behind the scenes.

Sometimes the pain we feel is protection from the spiritual forces of evil.

When we live according to our own selfish desires and for our own selfish reasons, Satan is pleased. He wins when we choose self, and he will continue to draw us into his control. He fights for control of our thoughts and our actions, waging his battles in the unseen realm.

But God is not content to let Satan win these battles, so He fights for us in ways we don't always know. He protects us in ways we cannot

understand. **Behind the scenes of your life, God allows temporary pain to protect you from ultimate defeat.**

If the pain you feel is from God saying “No,” remember the words of Psalm 84:11: “...*no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless.*” God doesn’t tell you no because He finds joy in it; He tells you no to protect you from what you cannot see.

In a world where we can Google anything we don’t understand and where we can find anything we need with the devices at our fingertips, living in remembrance of the unseen realm is nearly impossible. It takes deliberate effort and constant reminders. Scripture reminds us to “*fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal*” (2 Corinthians 4:18).

Our pain protects us from what we cannot see.

Purpose #5: Pain Refines Us for Worth in the Kingdom

From the moment we accept Christ to the moment we die, we go through a process called sanctification, which simply means becoming more like Christ. Our lives are a journey in denying our natural selves

more and choosing Christ's character more often, and this process does not happen overnight. It takes place with every decision we make, every prayer we pray, and every thought we think.

Sanctification makes us more effective for the work of bringing Christ's Kingdom to earth, and sanctification doesn't happen through rainbows and sunshine.

Becoming like Christ means living like Christ, and any reading of the gospels will reveal that in his life, He suffered immensely. He was rejected, mocked, tortured, and killed.

Every pain we ever feel, according to 1 Peter 4:13, makes us "*partners with Christ in his suffering.*" Our pain reminds us of his, and our suffering will make us more like him. Our hardships will bring selflessness, enable compassion, provide empathy, and turn our minds to Christ. Our pain will make us more like Jesus, and it's only when we're like Jesus that we can have any eternal impact.

Matthew 5:10-12 says, "*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*" The word persecute in these verses means "to harass or trouble." Whenever we feel harassment, trouble, or pain for our relationship with God, He says we are blessed and that we should rejoice. **Our pain now**

benefits us eternally, and our suffering now benefits the Kingdom exponentially.

When we are in pain, Satan's ploy is to disrupt our thoughts and cause us to believe his lies. As Pastor Mark Pangel says, "If he can cause your mind to believe your present circumstances are your future realities, he's got you trapped."

In our pain, we must remember what Lisa Bevere teaches, that "the attacks on your life have much more to do with who you might be in the future than who you have been in the past." Satan sees the potential in your future, and his goal is to prevent you from leaving the impact for God that is in your destiny. His goal is to disrupt Kingdom workers from bringing heaven to earth.

Jesus did not come to earth to seek enjoyment. He came to glorify His Father and to provide salvation for people. Likewise, we are here to glorify the Father and to share the gospel with everyone. **Pain, as paradoxical as it may seem, makes us better able to glorify God and love His people.**

Pain gives us worth in the Kingdom because it makes us more like Christ, and when we are more like Christ, we are better able to do the work He has entrusted to us. As Ann Voskamp said, "Our most meaningful purpose can be found exactly in our most painful brokenness."

Our pain prepares us to leave a Kingdom impact.

What You Need to Remember

Pain and suffering are never enjoyable, and they are not things you should chase. However, when they inevitably come, there are riches to be found in their midst. **For every pain and every hardship God allows into your life, there are corresponding lessons, invitations, and blessings.** *Your task is to look for them.* Whether the pain is physical or spiritual, emotional or relational, God wants to teach you something and provide something for you that He otherwise could not.

Pain always - *always* - has a purpose. Tim Keller says, “This is a remarkable view of suffering, that if faced and endured with faith, it can in the end only make us better, stronger, and more filled with greatness and joy. Suffering, then, actually can use evil against itself.”

Pain reacquaints us with our suffering Savior. It redirects us when we’re wandering down wrong paths, and it reminds us of what really matters. Our pain protects us when we can’t see behind the scenes, and pain reassures that God will never - not once - leave us. **Pain, in the upside down Kingdom of our God, is for our good.**

Would you believe that today?

About Jennie G. Scott



As a high school English teacher, Jennie always encouraged her students to chase their dreams. After nine years in the classroom, she recently left to chase her own dream of writing. The mom of two writes about enjoying whatever life throws your way, even if (and

especially when) it isn't what you planned. Her own unexpected journey is now her ministry. She blogs about thriving in the unplanned at www.jenniegscott.com.

When she's not braving the elements at her son's sports practices or driving her daughter to gymnastics, she loves to run and to read what the Amazon fairy delivers! She is active in the church she helped launch, and during football season, her blood runs orange for the Clemson Tigers.

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