



From Coping to Cure

By Henry Brandt, Ph.D.

LESSON 12: I HATE PAIN!

THOUGHT STARTER:

Does personal peace allow you to endure more pain?

Is peace the absence of pain?

"This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

Nehemiah 8:10, NIV

"This is the day which the LORD has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it."

Psalms 118:24, NKJV

Several years ago I had some difficulty digesting one of my wife's typical, sumptuous, delicious Christmas dinners. The discomfort lasted several days and a physician neighbor urged me to go to the hospital the next morning for a blood test.

A short time after the examination, he came into the waiting room and told me my appendix had to come out immediately. My reply was, "Hey, let's cool it and think it over for a few days. I know you need the work, but let's slow down here." He assured me that he was serious. I was to go at once to a hospital room, and he would operate as soon as I could be prepared for surgery. Prior to this I had only been hospitalized for two days to give an injured knee some rest.

The next thing I knew, I awoke from the effects of the anesthesia. For two days my total attention was focused on me and my excruciating, horrible, unendurable pain! The pain was so bad that I'd consider carefully before even moving a hand! All the muscles in my body would become tense, anticipating another knife-stabbing pain.

The first day after surgery, a nurse insisted that I get out of bed and take a few steps.

"You are kidding," I said. "There is no way you'll get me to do that!"

Unyielding, she firmly made me get up. The pain was incredible. A cold sweat all over

my body added to my amazing, unbelievable discomfort. I would cringe with every move. To take one more step seemed inconceivable. She claimed that to move around was a shortcut to healing and to the elimination of future extended pain. But returning to my bed was beyond consideration. I told the nurse that I would just remain standing in the middle of the room if it was okay with her. Remaining firm, she forced me back into bed. Exhausted, all I could concentrate on was my painful body bathed in sweat. All I wanted was a pill to rescue me from my misery.

PEACE IN THE MIDST OF PAIN

During the second night, when darkness enveloped the room, it was a lonely, forsaken place indeed. I'm sure there were no audible voices in that room and I have no idea what time it was, but it was as though I heard a voice that said: "Why do you lay there suffering alone when I laid down my life to be with you, to give you my peace and joy and comfort?"

For the first time in two days, my mind was focused on something other than my own misery.

As I lay there in the hospital bed, I began thinking that for more than a quarter of a century I had traveled the world, telling people about Jesus. I had taught people that He gave His life so He could come into our lives and be with us, that He promised to comfort us, and that He promised to give us peace and joy. I have taught this all these years, and now, here I lay, all alone, bathed in sweat, my muscles in knots, dreading every new second of my miserable life. Surely this is not peace or joy. This is not fellowship with the Lord.

It hit me: for two days and a night I had not given a thought toward the Lord. I had not even considered that peace and joy were possible with the presence of this pain I felt. I had been told that the discomfort would last for two weeks. Surely comfort and peace meant the absence of pain—they had nothing to do with God! I was shocked at my own thinking!

Why was I two days late in coming to God? Well, this was the first physically painful experience in my life that I couldn't handle. I never related pain with peace because I had never had to in the past. I might have hit my finger with a hammer or had a sore knee, but that was the worst that had happened to me physically.

I like Billy Graham's definition of joy:

Joy is not gush: joy is not jolliness.
Joy is simply perfect acquiescence in God's will,
because the soul delights itself in God.¹

I began to pray, "Lord, I'm sorry I've turned my back on You. I've assumed that comfort

and peace depended on finding a painless position in bed or by swallowing a pill. Forgive me, Lord. I thought I was dependent on You, but here I am trying to be self-sufficient. If Your Word is true, then I repent. Comfort me. Restore Your peace and joy."

I was amazed that I felt my muscles relax. The sweating ceased. Soon I fell asleep.

The next morning was great. My first waking sensation was a stab of pain. I welcomed it. The dread was gone. My body was relaxed. I worked my way out of bed alone, amazed and pleased to discover that a body at peace can take a lot of pain.

I went home the fifth day and was told that the pain would gradually diminish over a period of two weeks. The presence of a wife who was there twenty-four hours a day was a great treasure. Savoring the smells of my wife's cooking was delightful, and eating that delicious food was pleasurable as I looked out at the ocean view. Her presence by my side in the hospital and at home was satisfying beyond description. The sympathy and love shown by Betty, Leroy, Lois, Bob, and Jayne are treasures one cannot buy. Phone calls from all over the country and a stack of cards six inches high were a delight. A warm, friendly, compassionate surgeon, a nurse (actually a very nice person), and aides made up a presence to be appreciated beyond words. What more could one ask for? Yet, none of these wonderful privileges were a substitute for God's comforting presence in my heart.

How does God fill your body with comfort and peace and joy in the presence of pain? I don't know how He does it. But Jesus proved to me that His own words are true:

"Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28, KJV)

He was there all the time, but for two days I depended solely on my bed, water, pills, the presence of skilled medical personnel, and visits by my wife and friends.

You would think that Jesus would say, "You turned your back on Me; now I'll turn My back on you. It's only fair. Call on Me in a few more days after I've nursed My hurt feelings for a while."

No, He kept His word. He was there when I called.

Why did I have to go through the pain of an operation? Why do we even have pain in the world? I don't have all the answers to that question. I just know that when we have circumstances that are difficult, God has provided a way to have peace in the middle of pain.

Two weeks after I came home from the hospital, my wife had a sudden, strange attack. She crawled into bed and stayed there a full day. Our friend Betty came down from her apartment to help. My wife said to us, "Go out of the room and leave me alone. Your

presence bothers me." Betty and I just looked at each other. I hobbled out of the room wondering what to do; this wasn't the predictably pleasant Eva that we knew. Something had to be drastically wrong. We called in our doctor neighbor, and he confirmed that something was seriously wrong.

Two days later, after Eva had been to a hospital for some tests, our beloved surgeon called on us in our home: "I'll level with you," he said gravely. "You have an abdominal tumor, Eva. Very likely it is malignant. We must operate at once."

THE FUNDAMENTALS OF FAITH

He left. We sat silently, stunned. Cancer! How can this be? Except for babies, Eva had never been sick. Neither one of us said it, but we both knew we could be staring a painful death in the face. Now, my new hospital experience with Jesus served us well.

Death? Eva?

We decided to review the fundamentals of our faith before the operation. There was no need for her to make the mistake of ignoring God's help as I did.

Fundamental 1: Jesus said: "I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also" (John 14:2-3, NKJV).

For the Christian, the other side of death is heaven. It is a good idea to drop that thought into your mind before stressful conditions swirl around you. I only advise this process for the Christian, however; for the non-Christian, thinking about the other side of death will possibly increase stressful feelings.

Fundamental 2: God instructed His people: "This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength" (Nehemiah 8:10, NIV).

This was a precious promise given to the Israelites as Nehemiah repaired the wall and gate in spite of continuous harassment from Israel's enemies and resistance and criticism from many of his own people. We rested our meager faith on this promise. There would be as much strength as needed in a day, enough to joyfully endure the daily demand.

Fundamental 3: [God will comfort] us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth in Christ (2 Corinthians 1:4-5 KJV).

We needed to look to God for comfort, which is not the same as the reassurance that

comes from being surrounded by skilled professionals, loving family and friends, good equipment, and medicine. We deeply appreciated human help, but humans could not do what only God could do.

As we prepared to take my wife to the hospital, she decided not to trust her memory. She wrote these verses on three-by-five cards and took them with her:

“As thy days, so shall thy strength be.” (Deuteronomy 33:25, KJV)

“For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ.” (2 Corinthians 1:5, KJV)

“That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings.” (Philippians 3:10, KJV)

"This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength." (Nehemiah 8:10, NIV)

“Let the peace of God rule in your hearts, . . . and be thankful. (Colossians 3:15, NKJV)

GOD WILL HONOR YOUR CHOICE

The operation was over. She had a tube in her nose and down into her stomach. Another tube was attached to the abdominal area. Another one led to a bottle suspended above her head and off to one side. Her operation made mine look like no operation! Yet she seemed to be enveloped in a cocoon of peace. The doctors, nurses, her roommate, and her visitors all noticed it and marveled. Her successful recovery was a serene, peaceful scene in the presence of excruciating pain.

What a contrast to my miserable, unhappy, complaining, self-centered response to the first two days after a minor operation. If you prefer my kind of response, God will honor your choice. On the other hand, He will give you peace and joy *if* you let Him.

How does God do it? He doesn't explain. But by a step of faith, Eva found that she could have peace and joy in her heart when her body was afflicted with seemingly unbearable pain.

When I was a young engineer and struggling to understand what the Christian life was all about, I fell in love with this Bible verse:

“I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day. (2 Timothy 1:12, NKJV)

In my wife's hospital room, thirty-five years later, we knew that we could trust biblical

principles. In this crisis, we were not two desperate people thumbing through an unfamiliar book to learn about a strange God. Rather, we were two people reviewing Bible verses and reaching out to a familiar Friend we had tried to follow for thirty-five years.

Billy Graham said it very well:

Mt. Everest was never climbed in a day. Those who attempt to climb its treacherous slopes spend months, even years, in training and practice. Each small mountain conquered prepares one for a higher mountain and a tough climb ahead.

So, too, the best preparation for tough times are the little difficulties and how we react to them. . . . you and I are called upon to learn what it means to trust God in every circumstance, and to live for Him no matter what comes our way.

We must think more clearly about suffering and rearrange our priorities so that when Armageddon comes, we will not be taken by surprise or be unprepared. Like Joseph storing up grain for the years of famine that lay ahead, may we store up the truths of God's Word in our hearts as much as possible, so we are prepared for whatever suffering we are called upon to endure.

As an army officer once said, "Weather in war is always favorable if you know how to use it."²

Many of us find life hard and full of pain. We cannot avoid these things; but we should not allow our harsh experiences to deaden our sensibilities and make us stoical or sour. The true problem of living is to keep our hearts sweet and gentle in the hardest conditions and experience.³

I am sure that the loving Lord scheduled my operation just before my wife's so that I could appreciate and understand the pain that she experienced.

I also learned that my natural tendency in an unfamiliar traumatic situation was to look for peace after the end of the difficult circumstances, rather than obtain peace from God in the middle of the circumstances. When my wife and I focused on the Lord before and after her surgery, we both found that there was a world of difference in the peace in our hearts.

Based on my own personal experience, I recommend that everyone seek God *before* any operation or crisis. Take time alone or together and write down the Bible verses you feel apply to your situation. Don't make my mistake! Quickly invite the Lord into every crisis.

Lesson: Any crisis is a trigger to focus on God.

DISCUSSION STARTERS

- Review the thought starter at the beginning of the chapter. What thoughts were started?
- Review the lead Bible verse. What does it say to you? Did you observe yourself in relation to the verse? Did you observe others in relation to the verse? Did you find any additional verses?
- What is your response to the lesson at the end of the chapter?

1. What steps must we take to be peaceful in the presence of pain?
2. Can you think of an example when a person insists eagerly and willingly to suffer pain?
3. Review the three fundamentals of this lesson.
4. How does 2 Timothy 1:12 affect your thinking?
5. How should we react when pain in our own life or in someone else's life causes us to back away from dealing with the situation in a biblical manner? (How can you talk to me about sin in my life? Can't you see how much pain I am in?)

¹ Billy Graham, *Till Armageddon* (Minneapolis, MN: Grason, 1981), 140.

² Graham, 9-10.

³ Graham, 139.

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