

Pain with Purpose

By Brian T. Whitaker, Whitaker Writings

“Daddy, I don’t understand,” Katie said. “I pray that God would keep me from having bad dreams, but I still have bad dreams. And they make me scared.”

This was a heartfelt question from my six-year-old daughter. Katie didn’t know it, but had stumbled into a deep theological truth. If God is powerful enough to stop all suffering and pain, and loving enough to care—both of which are absolutely true—why do we still have suffering and pain?

Part of the answer is that suffering and pain are part of the presence of sin in this world. But that answer is incomplete. Could there be some clear reasons that the all-powerful Lord of the universe has allowed the presence of suffering and pain to continue, even to touch those He has redeemed?

This space doesn’t allow an in-depth answer to this question; many volumes have been written on this topic. But permit me to cite some scripture, then outline a few brief thoughts.

Romans 8:28-29: And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

James 1:12: Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

James 1:2-4: Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Romans 5:3-5: Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

2 Corinthians 1:3-7: Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

One of the biggest struggles we face in pain and suffering is the question of “why.” At a fundamental level, we want to know there is some kind of purpose to the pain we’re feeling. Although we will likely never get specific answers to our “why” question, the Bible certainly gives us some general answers to confirm there is a purpose to pain within the loving sovereignty of our Lord. And this gives us great hope to persevere through any and every difficulty.

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It may seem trite to say that “hardship produces character.” I heard that often as I grew up, most often when I complained about some household chores. Yet the Bible is full of teaching that supports this fundamental concept. Pain—suffering—hardship—these indeed produce in us character, most clearly the character of Christ. Suffering produces:

- Christlikeness (Romans 8:29, Romans 5:4)
- Heavenly Rewards (James 1:12)
- Joy (James 1:2)
- Maturity (James 1:4)
- Hope (Romans 5:4)
- Ability to understand and help others (2 Corinthians 1:3-7)

Pain always has a purpose, whether or not we can see it at the moment. It deepens...

- our experience of His presence
- our trust in Him
- our understanding of His sovereignty in all things
- our faith to face the next challenge
- our ability to help others
- our usefulness in His kingdom
- our longing for heaven

Difficulties and pain always have a purpose. Pain without purpose would surely lead to pessimism. But pain with purpose leads to peace and profit. We worship and serve a Lord who cares enough to allow these things so we might become more useful in His hands...to become more like His Son.

And pain can even deepen our worship. It did for Job (see Job 1:1-21, esp. verse 20). When we see His presence and His provision in the midst of pain, we can be filled with praise. Sometimes we think it hard to praise God in the midst of a hard time, but indeed it is in those times when we can most experience His loving care, and when we can grow in Him the most. Should that not even be reflected in our worship?

Perhaps we might return to Katie’s question. How did I answer her? Although she is probably too young to grasp it completely, I told her that the Lord is with her in her room as she sleeps at night. If He allows the nightmare, then He is inviting her to pray to Him and trust Him to give her peace. I told her that God doesn’t always take away the scary things, but that He always helps us through them. I pray that her understanding of these truths will increase as she follows the Lord and grows in Him. I continue to pray that for myself, as well.