

**First Baptist Church of Augusta**  
**Job 2:7-13**  
**2 Corinthians 12:7-10**  
**“PainFULL: The Problem of Pain”**  
**October 12, 2008**  
**PainFULL Series**

NAU John 16:33 *"These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world."*

“I have a head-ache.” I don’t recall exactly when I said this last. It could have been a month ago or several months. I don’t have many headaches and when I do, they are gratefully rather mild, nothing at all like the migraines I know that some suffer. But a headache is a headache, and the pain, however mild, is, well, a pain! “Did you take something for it?” is my wife’s usual response. Her remark, while predictable, nearly always irritates me. I am trying to complain for goodness sake. Let’s not begin with the obvious. Maybe it is because I am a man, and I have all these unfortunate images that a man is suppose to endure the pain, or maybe it is because I am inherently suspicious of medicating every pain and discomfort, and so I find myself in the usual conflict of “to medicate or not to medicate.” Or, maybe I just like to complain and hope for a little sympathy. Trust me, if the pain is bad enough, I will find the *Advil* and take a pill or two.

Don’t you wish that every pain – physical or emotional – could be countered by taking a pill or two?

Pain is a problem. Philosophers have contemplated about it. Theologians have pondered it. What is pain? Why do we have pain? Is pain necessary? Cannot God do something about pain?

C.S. Lewis wrote extensively about the problem of pain, embodied particularly in a book by the title, *The Problem of Pain*. In the early pages he surmises, that to exclude pain in a world requires taking away causality and free will. To do so would mean excluding life itself. (p. 25) To live, in other words, is to live with pain.

For the next four weeks I am going to share with you a series of messages entitled: PainFULL. If, as Lewis contends, that life itself does not exclude pain, what do the Scriptures and our faith teach us about pain? We will be considering the pain of disappointment, the pain of depression, and the pain of losing someone you love. Today, I will focus on the general idea of pain.

Let me first clarify what I mean by pain. We suffer pain for all kinds of reasons:

Natural causes beyond our control, such as hurricanes, earthquakes, and the like.

Physical infirmities: diseases, cancer, migraines...every body is a mortal body destined to die.

Mental illnesses like depression, traumatic stress syndrome, obsessive compulsive disorder...

Ignorance: our own, as well as the ignorance of others.

And then, there is the pain of mistreatment...We are people who are pain-full. The theological word for this is sin.

I suppose nearly everyone who came to Jesus came because of the problem of pain: the possessed of evil spirits, the despondent and grief-stricken, the inflicted, the confused, the twisted and stooped. Even the angry crowds and the indignant religious leaders came because of their pain. We all want to be rid of pain, and for good reason. Again, to quote from C.S. Lewis: “Pain is painful!”

There is perhaps no better biblical picture of pain and suffering than that of Job. Most of us know the story of Job very well. The Bible is clear in pointing out that Job was a righteous man. In the very first verse of

the very first chapter of Job, it is said that Job was blameless and upright and he feared God and turned away from evil. You cannot get much more devout than that description. In other words, Job's relationship to God and neighbor is not of question. And yet, in spite of Job's good standing, he suffers the loss of property, family, and health. His pain is near complete. Quietly we gather behind Job's wife when she says, "*Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die.*" (2:9) Now that is pain.

Job lost it all, and now God is silent. Perhaps one of the greatest pains one can bear is the pain, when what we have believed about God fails us.

One of the three friends of Job, Eliphaz, will soon chastise Job saying to the effect that your great suffering, your great pain must be due to something you have done against God. "You have drifted away from the Lord Job," so says Eliphaz. Thomas Long writes: "Eliphaz is so busy painting the 'Get Back to God' sign beside the old road, he has failed to notice that a new highway has been built and the old road abandoned." (article from the journal *Theology Today*).

Have you ever heard someone explain away pain in such theological terms? I have. Phrases like: "It was the Lord's will," or "They are reaping what they have sown," or even the unfortunate words of the late Jerry Falwell, who remarked after the attacks of September 11, that God was getting back at America's lax morals and allowed the hijackers to slam into the World Trade Towers.

We have all heard such poor and misguided explanations of the problem of pain. And sometimes we have even thought it ourselves. Each of the three friends of Job will argue with Job, seeking to explain away Job's pain, based on their own understanding of God. Eliphaz will tell Job, you need to get back to God and Job is saying, I never left God. Bildad will say, "God said it and I believe it and that's that," and Job says fine, but I did nothing to deserve this! And Zophar increases the volume of the rhetoric of the first two friends, but still Job remains in pain.

In reading Job, we will notice something about all of these friends of Job: each friend is concerned with protecting their own security of faith, but in doing so, they only demonstrate their insecurity.

Job teaches us that our faith in God does not *explain away pain* nor *rid us of pain*, but for some, such as Job's three friends, that is just too much. What we are tempted to want is for God to be a *Tylenol* or pill, that we can take to make it all go away, a band-aid God, that hides the scabs and soothes the discomfort, an elixir God, that we can drink up and narcoticize our dislocation when pain strikes.

My brothers and sisters of this beloved community, belief and a relationship with God does *not* inoculate us from this world and life of pain. One commentary writes: "One finds out what one really believes when they face a crisis." (*New Interpreters Bible*, p. 358).

There were some things about pain Job needed to release. Poet, Mary Oliver, whose better works have been forged from the ovens of pain, writes in *Blackwater Woods*,

To live in this world  
You must be able  
To do three things:  
To love what is mortal;  
To hold it  
Against your bones knowing  
Your own life depends on it;  
and, when the time comes to let it go,  
To let it go.

Now back to these three friends of Job; they were not all wrong. This passage gives us a great picture of what we are to do when those we know and love have been debilitated by pain. Years ago, Wayne Oates pointed this out in a class lecture. Let me read selections of it again from the text:

*11 Now when Job's three friends heard of all these troubles that had come upon him, each of them set out from his home...They met together to go and console and comfort him. 12 When they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him, and they raised their voices and wept aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads. 13 They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.*

These friends did three things that are worth mentioning when they learned of Job's pain: 1) they responded by coming to Job, 2) they entered into Job's grief by sharing with him – this is what we mean by the word “empathy”, and 3) their presence of silence was their wisest counsel. They sat with Job and remained silent for seven days and seven nights. Ironically, it was when his friends started talking that they ran afoul.

Years ago, while in seminary, I participated in a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education, or CPE. One day, I was talking to my supervisor about my frustrations in counseling others that have been involved in crisis situations, like death or illness. I remember telling her that I didn't feel like I had all the proper answers or that I was too young to know enough information to help these suffering individuals out of their pain. I was frustrated, because I felt that although I had been through so much education on the college and seminary level, I still didn't know enough to answer everyone's questions. Then she asked me if I ever had a dog. “Yes, I grew up with dogs,” I said, and she went on to ask, that while I was growing up, were there ever moments where I felt a little down, a little blue. Certainly, everyone goes through moments when they feel sort of down. Finally, she asked me, did that dog ever cheer me up during those times. I knew where she was going. If a dog has the ability to bring comfort to the distressed, how much more comfort, can you and I bring to those in this world who are hurting just by simply being present?

It is not so much what we say, as it is to just being there. Quietness is one of our better teachers. One can learn much in the silence of company. Psychologist, Israel Gerber wrote: "Quietness is a spiritual quality, which conveys a sense of protection and patience." (*The Psychology of the Suffering Mind*)

The problem of pain cannot be solved by our own intellectual or theological convictions, so it is best just to hush. But what do we do with God? In the end, Job is willing to give up on his theology, but Job just cannot give up on God.

Job had to have the courage to allow his faith to be *challenged* and *changed*. Job's world was a world of answers and order. But all that changed. In the end, we cannot, through scripture or logic, explain away suffering. But would we really want to? Do we really want to play God? The story of Job implies there has to be in the end a trust in the One who is God.

Marcus Borg describes such trust as buoyancy. Citing Kierkegaard, faith is like floating in a vast deep. If you struggle, thrash about, or rigidly resist, you will eventually sink. He writes, that like teaching a child to float, “Faith as trust is trusting in the buoyancy of God” (*The Heart of Christianity*, p. 31).

Job 42:1 *Then Job answered the LORD: 2 "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. 3 ...Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know ...5 I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you;*

Job moves from relating to God through someone else's belief, into experiencing God on his own. Paul, the apostle, who was dealing with his own pain, this “*thorn of the flesh*” shares these words of God: “*My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.*” (2 Corinthians 12:9)

The Bible and the best of theology do not completely answer the problem of pain. We are directed then to trust in all our pain, as I quoted from Borg earlier, "...in the buoyancy of God."

Thomas Long writes: "Job is one who has learned to *trust* the God he *loves* and *love* the God he *trusts*." (*Theology Today*) The story closes with these final two verses in chapter 42: *After this Job... saw his children, and his children's children, four generations...And Job died, old and full of days.*