

When It Won't Go Away: A Biblical Response to Chronic Pain



By Michael R. Emler

If I were to choose between pain and nothing, I would choose pain.

—William Faulkner

Physical pain is a universal human experience. Everyone has experienced acute physical pain—the kind of pain that lasts for seconds, minutes, hours, or maybe even days. But some experience chronic pain, the kind of bone-wearing, soul-deadening pain that lasts for weeks, months, or even years. How should we think about the “problem of pain?”¹ Pain serves us well as a friend who warns of impending danger: Watch out! The stove is hot! But what do you do when pain becomes a constant, lurking enemy who seems to have no function other than to torture you?

This article will flesh out the experience of chronic pain from several different perspectives. It will introduce a framework for redeeming chronic pain, a framework to help you “seize the meanwhile,”² while we wait for the day we see Jesus face to face, when all suffering ends.

My first encounter with chronic pain came during a summer training program for collegiate

ministry the summer before I started medical school. I met a kind and gentle woman there who seemed wise beyond her years. Many months before she had been in a car accident and suffered from chronic daily headaches as a result. I would not have known it by looking at her.

Flash forward a few years. A gentleman in our medical practice had a problem with chronic facial pain. He often screamed out when waves of pain hit. Nothing fully suppressed this intense, horrible pain.

Two very different people. Two very different experiences of chronic pain. Although physical pain is a universal human phenomenon, it is intensely personal and intensely private.

In Paul Brand and Philip Yancey’s words, “Pain is the loneliest, most private sensation.”³ We can’t transpose our experiences of pain onto someone else. We can’t say things like, “I have chronic low back pain too, but I just push past it and do what I need to do.” Maybe you have made such comments, or heard those comments

*Michael R. Emler is a counselor and instructor on the CCEF faculty. He is a medical doctor and practiced family medicine for twelve years before earning his M. Div. at Westminster Theological Seminary.

¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962).

² Marva Dawn, *Joy in Our Weakness: A Gift of Hope from the Book of Revelation*, Rev. Ed., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 12-16.

³ Paul Brand, Philip Yancey, *Pain, The Gift Nobody Wants* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993), p. 204.

or something similar from others. Such words are rarely helpful. What they typically communicate is, "I am clueless about your pain, but if you respond as I do, everything will be better!"

Pain Research

What are the biological or physiological underpinnings of the pain experience? Answering that question will help us understand why the same pain stimulus brings cries of anguish from one person while barely registering for another person.

Pain researchers find no simple, direct relationship between tissue damage (the pain stimulus) and the experienced pain. Normally, a very close correlation exists between the severity of the pain stimulus and the severity of the pain experienced. But that relationship can become disrupted and lead to the experience of chronic pain. In other words, there is a difference between the bodily detection of potential or actual tissue damage, and the experience that we interpret and call pain. Pain is a very complex experience, influenced by many factors, some objective, others subjective.

Pain receptors, for instance, fire in your finger when you touch a hot stove. This is the objective, physiological aspect of pain. But there are many other factors as well:

- your cultural background,
- your anticipation of pain,
- your previous experiences with pain,
- the context in which pain occurs,
- your emotional response, and
- your cognitive processing of the pain (how you think about the pain).⁴

How do these all come together to produce pain? Probably the simplest way to understand the pain phenomenon is through Melzack's "gate control theory." The pain experience involves three levels.⁵

First level: Pain stimulates receptors in the skin or internal organs. This leads to

transmission of a pain message to the spinal cord.

Second level: The spinal cord either relays or doesn't relay the pain message on to the brain. Sometimes the "gate" opens and the transmission of the pain message goes on to the brain. We then interpret the sensory stimulus as pain. But sometimes the gate is closed. The pain stimulus starts but never fully makes it to the brain. The pain is not consciously experienced, or it is experienced to a lesser degree.

Third level: The brain perceives the pain stimulus and we consciously assign meaning and implications to the experience. It is that combination of perception and interpretation that makes pain a unique and personalized experience. It is also why our emotions and thinking play such a huge role in the pain experience.

In medical circles, the psychosomatic connection between the level of pain and cognition/emotion is well established. But secular psychosomatic theory misses the most critical piece: we are created, body and soul, in the image of our God. Our emotions and our thoughts ultimately refer to our Creator. They reveal our hearts, or our basic inner disposition, toward God. We should not be surprised, then, that fear, anxiety, anger, bitterness, self-pity, and despair may make the pain experience worse. Or that hope, trust, confidence, and a sense of connection with others can improve the experience of pain. God has made us both body and spirit. The weakness and pain of our body will influence and provoke our hearts. The responses of our hearts, whether weighted towards belief or towards unbelief, serve to modulate the pain experience for better or for worse. This realization, that pain is not less than but more than physiology, is hope-building. If the pain experience is not set in stone physiologically, and secular pain theorists know it is not, then we have hope for not just coping with pain, but being able to grow in Christ-likeness in the midst of pain.

Pain and Culture

Attitudes regarding the problem of pain vary depending on the culture in which you live. Paul Brand, a missionary surgeon and orthopedist, worked among leprosy patients in

⁴ No author, *Pain Management Made Incredibly Easy*, (Springhouse, PA: Lippincott, Williams, & Wilkins, 2003), p. 1.

⁵ This description of the gate control theory is condensed from Brand and Yancey, pgs. 201-202.

India, and then in Louisiana, for many years. He observed, "Some cultures expect suffering and learn not to fear it. Other cultures suffer less but fear it more."⁶

Brand also said, "On my travels I have observed an ironic law of reversal at work. As a society gains the ability to limit suffering, it loses the ability to cope with what suffering remains."⁷ Does an individualistic society like ours foster an intensification of the pain experience? Does it lower the threshold for experiencing pain? How does my culture shape my expectations about the experience of pain? If we live in a culture that maximizes pleasure while minimizing or avoiding pain at all cost, how do I, as a believer, adopt that worldview in subtle or not-so-subtle ways?

Pain and Temptation

Specific temptations towards fear, anxiety,

would have us see that contentment is elusive—whether we experience a lot of trials, or we have a relatively trial-free life. The grass may be greener on the other side of the fence, but you still have to mow the lawn! Paul wants us to see that contentment is elusive when we base it solely on circumstances, whether painful or happy.

Redeeming Pain in a Fallen World

Given this brief overview of the pain experience, what does it look like to have transformation of suffering caused by pain? What does it look like to redeem pain in a fallen world?

1. Mere Orthodoxy is Not Enough

Having a right theology of suffering in place cognitively is necessary but not sufficient. You can assent to biblical truth without trusting the wise hand of your Father. The battle rages,

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hopelessness, and anger do surface in your experience with chronic pain. But *unique* temptations also surface with a relatively trial-free life—love of comfort, laziness, and even blindness to the relative shallowness of our faith. Pain tempts us, but pain does not uniquely tempt us. Paul discusses his own experience in this way:

I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through Him who gives me strength. (Phil. 4:11-13)

We tend to think that the breeding ground for discontent is trial, hardship, and pain. But Paul

not in intellectual reasoning, but in the heart before God. In one sense, my approach to redeeming pain is not "new." But often in our struggles, we don't need new *information*. We need new *implications* of the truths we already know. Scripture frequently calls us to remember, and remember, and remember again. We are so prone to forget.

From the perspective of a counselor or other helper, mere orthodoxy is not enough. I may hold a viable theology of suffering but fail to incarnate it in a loving way in the lives of those to whom I minister. Far be it from us to have Job's assessment of his friends leveled against us: "You are all miserable comforters." No, we want to incarnate the love of Christ in our suffering and in our comforting of those who suffer.

2. The Ultimate Goal in Dealing with Chronic Pain

What is your ultimate goal in dealing with chronic pain? Is it to remove pain? Or to redeem pain? Is it to take away pain? Or to transform pain? Or is it a little of both? Certainly, continue

⁶ Brand and Yancey, p. 187.

⁷ Brand and Yancey, p. 187.

to pray for relief of pain. Take those steps to relieve pain in your life, whether it be consultation with a physician, physical therapy, medications, or other pain control modalities. These means may or may not be helpful. Either way, pain relief cannot be our ultimate goal. Remember that Scripture speaks both to the benefit of experiencing suffering and to the benefit of relieving suffering. Scripture ultimately holds these together in Jesus Christ. If your hope is that God will redeem your pain experience so that you might better reflect Him, that you might be better equipped to minister comfort to others who are hurting, then you can be absolutely sure that God intends to transform your pain in that very way.

3. A Christ-Centered Gaze Transforms the Experience of Pain

How does this transformation occur? There's no formula. But a starting point is to use the right lens to interpret your life, hardships, and pain. A Christ-centered gaze reframes your experience. It helps you see the shape of Christ's grace and mercy to you in your time of need.

Your suffering occurs in Christ. *Your* story (including pain) is embedded in *His* story (including pain). Your pain has a bigger context than your individual world. Your suffering (which at first glance might appear to be a completely isolated subjective experience) actually occurs in the larger context of your triune God working out His purposes in history, a history that ultimately climaxes in the coming of Christ.

Why is this connection with Christ so important to see? Suffering after the cross is different from suffering before the cross. Your suffering now, as a believer, has a Christ-oriented perspective that your Old Testament counterparts did not experience.⁸ Your pain and suffering involve a participation in the very sufferings of Christ. Several passages bring that idea out.

- Dear friends, *do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the*

sufferings of Christ. (1 Pet. 4:12-13)

- *Just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.* (2 Cor. 1:5)
- I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection *and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings.* (Phil. 3:10)

I don't know about you, but I want to *delete all the italics* and keep the "good parts"! I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection, period. Thank you very much. But Paul is saying that these three things—knowing Christ, knowing the power of His resurrection, and participating in the fellowship of His sufferings—are all part of the same package. There is solidarity with your Savior when you suffer. You walk, in a sense, in Jesus' very footsteps: suffering and then glory.

Paul also makes this amazing statement: "Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of His body, which is the Church" (Col. 1:24). Paul is not saying our sufferings add any redemptive or atoning value to Christ's work on the cross. There's nothing deficient about Jesus' suffering or humiliation. But what it must mean is that there's a purposeful link between the sufferings of Christ and our own sufferings.

The sum total of Christ's sufferings and our sufferings are a necessary part of moving God's redemptive agenda forward unto the consummation of His kingdom.⁹ In other words, your suffering today, your pain today, is actually part of the engine that drives forward redemptive history. It drives forward, pushing back the curse. Suffering and glory: that's the currency of the kingdom of God.

In fact, suffering reveals Christ to a glory starved world. Paul says this in his second letter to the Corinthians:

We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that His life may

⁸ Westminster Theological Seminary professor, Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., was the first person to help me appreciate this Christocentric perspective on suffering.

⁹ John Murray, quoted in Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "The Usefulness of the Cross," *Westminster Theological Journal* 41 (2), Spring 1979, p.242.

be revealed in our mortal body. (2 Cor. 4:10-11)

This is difficult to understand. Could it be that our Christian culture's conception and our own conception of what it means to manifest Jesus is too often self-sufficiency in disguise? Most of the time, many of us do get away with looking stronger than we actually are. Yet the message of the New Testament writers is that true glory reveals itself in weakness, not strength. So every time you take a faltering step of faith in the midst of your chronic pain to love God and to love others in concrete ways, that is glory under construction. That is glory in the making.

What implications arise from having this Christ-centered lens through which to view suffering? First, the very experiences that threaten to drive you the farthest from God are the exact experiences that bring you into to closest possible fellowship with your Savior. Do you believe that? "I believe, Lord. Help me overcome my unbelief."

Secondly, your connection with Christ means that your identity is bigger than that of a chronic pain sufferer. Your long-term experience of pain, or any other chronic illness, has the potential of defining who you are. Listen to what Paul says:

Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ if indeed we share in His sufferings in order that we may also share in His glory. (Rom. 8:17)

Paul is saying that your suffering actually confirms your identity as a child of God. It does not undermine that identity, even though it sometimes feels that way in the midst of your pain. We need a gaze that helps us see that we are a people who suffer in Christ. Our lives inextricably connect with His life.

4. Suffering is Meant to Occur in a Community of Christ-followers

Dr. Cicely Saunders, who started the hospice movement, said, "Suffering is only intolerable when nobody cares. One continually sees that faith in God and His care is made infinitely easier by the faith of someone who has shown kindness and sympathy."¹⁰ In other words, the way we incarnate or don't incarnate

the life of Christ to others either serves to bolster a person's faith or to wither it. Don't underestimate the power of Christian community.

What are some of the barriers to this kind of community-borne suffering? First, many of our churches are better equipped to deal with acute crisis-oriented problems and are not set up structurally, logistically, or personally to minister intensely over a long period. We're better at sprints than marathons.

Secondly, chronic pain can be invisible in the church. External cues that someone is experiencing chronic pain are often not visible. You don't always see a cast, wheelchair, or bandage. No one knows about your pain unless you tell someone.

Thirdly, when you do let others know, your hearers may find it hard to relate and compassionately minister to you over the long term. They simply may not understand your experience of chronic pain. Or possibly, a self-centered focus on pain dominates your conversations and relationships. Either way, the community fails. This failure to provide caring support should prompt both the sufferer and others to examine their actions.

What results if suffering occurs in the context of community? M. Scott Peck writes in *The Road Less Traveled*, "Joy is an uncapturable yet utterly predictable side effect of genuine community."¹¹ May God help us to move in that direction increasingly."

5. Scripture Gives Voice to Your Suffering

This avoids stoicism before God and before others. The so-called "stiff upper lip" posture of our individualized culture is nowhere to be found in Scripture. Scripture gives us warrant for crying out to God in our faithful confusion. As the Puritan author Jeremiah Burroughs points out, there is a difference between complaining *to* God (which Scripture warrants) and complaining *about* God.¹² In the psalms (e.g., Psalm 13, 77, 88), you see the heart's cry to God in the midst of distressing

¹⁰ Cecily Saunders, quoted in Brand and Yancey, p. 257.

¹¹ M. Scott Peck, quoted in Brand and Yancey, p. 302.

¹² Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, reprinted 1987, p. 21).

circumstances. This is the kind of warrant Scripture gives us—honest wrestling with integrity before the living God.

6. Scripture Reveals that Suffering is Purposeful.

I'm not saying you'll be able to discern all the facets of God's design in bringing chronic pain into your life; nor am I saying that the phrase, "God is working out His purposes" should be used casually or flippantly in the life of someone who's suffering. Clearly, Scripture bears witness to the rich tapestry of God's purpose in pain. One purpose of suffering, mentioned already, is being able to manifest the life of Jesus to a glory-starved world. To what other purposes for suffering does Scripture testify? Think in terms of benefit to self, benefit to others.

First, suffering reveals your heart and perfects your character. Consider three passages that deal with that aspect: 1 Peter 1:3-9, Romans 5:1-5, and James 1:2-8. Let's look in more detail at James 1:2-9. Here's how he begins.

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. (James 1:2-4)

Something about suffering both tests and matures faith. Did you ever wonder why James follows those statements with these words? "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5). James is not changing the subject! In the midst of suffering, we need God's wisdom (perspective) on our lives. James says there is something we lack that suffering *adds*. We need wisdom to embrace that fact, rather than lean on our own understanding, which would say that pain must invariably *subtract* from a joyful existence.

When I am with those people who have been most influential in my Christian life, I feel like I'm standing on holy ground. These people have suffered chronic, physical affliction. I want that same end-product of holiness. But I don't want to go through that refining fire to get

there. I want the fruit of the spirit in its fullness. I want the godly humility, but I want it an easier way. But I need to acknowledge that there are no shortcuts to that kind of mature and seasoned faith.

If suffering perfects your own character, it also equips you to comfort others in their miseries. Paul's words on this are integral to all ministries:

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. (2 Cor. 1:3-4)

Pain-sufferers are uniquely equipped to be conduits of Christ's comfort to other hurting people. Some of you may be saying, "Help others? Comfort others? My own mind is in turmoil. My body is in such pain that I rarely get out of the house during the course of the week." Functionally speaking, your experience may be predominantly like that of the paralytic in Mark 2, who needed four friends to carry him to Jesus. But *are* these opportunities for your experience of chronic, physical pain to be word in season to someone else who is hurting? Be faithful with those people whom God places in your path. He trusts that the glory He is working out in your life will actually rub off on them.

7. Already, but Not Yet

What does living with pain for the long haul look like? Let's assume that God may not relieve your physical pain until glory. How do you make future hope connect with present reality? Is there more for *now* other than the anticipation of what we do not have? The reality is that the end times have broken into the present. The last days are *now*. Our hope is not merely for some future state of events; namely, the second coming of Christ. Our hope is nourished *now* by what we already have today. Richard Gaffin notes:

It is so natural for us to associate suffering only with the delay of Christ's second coming and to view suffering only in the light of what we do not yet have in Christ; but when this happens, we have lost sight

of the critical fact that in the New Testament, Christian suffering is always seen within the context of the coming of the kingdom of God in power and as a manifestation of the resurrection life of Jesus.¹³

Present suffering has present meaning in the light of God's present purposes in bringing in His kingdom.

If we stand between redemption and final rest, what does that look like? One scriptural metaphor that captures that experience of having something *already, but not yet* in its fullness is the wilderness theme, particularly the wilderness wanderings of God's people, the Israelites. God rescued the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt. They experienced His mighty hand of redemption. But God didn't automatically plop them down in the Promised Land. Their route was circuitous, prolonged, and made worse by their response to the

water that flowed from the rock. Right now the living water flows within. The Bread of Life indwells me.

Finally, a wilderness mentality says, I will rest in the character of my God, who redeemed me and is with me, even when I don't understand the difficulties of the wilderness. So the theme of the wilderness reminds us that we are on this journey between redemption and final rest. We participate now in many spiritual benefits. That encourages us and gives us hope. But we honestly groan because we don't have yet the place and position of spiritual and physical glorification.

Conclusion

What does it look like to have these biblical perspectives shape your experience of chronic pain? Let me use the example of treating reflex sympathetic dystrophy (complex regional pain syndrome). This chronic pain

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hardship of the wilderness. The wilderness is the place of possessing some, but not all, of the benefits of God's redemption.

Life with chronic pain requires a wilderness mentality. What does that look like? First of all, a wilderness mentality says, I will not ignore the challenge of my present pain. God did not make me to be a stoic. But I will not allow these physical challenges to dominate and paralyze me through unbelief.

Secondly, a wilderness mentality says I will have eyes to see what I have now as a present possession in Christ, a possession that will be fully mine in the future. I want to have eyes to see that right now I have an inheritance. My Lord has given the Holy Spirit as a down payment, guaranteeing the rest of the inheritance to come (Eph. 1:13-14). I want to have eyes to see that today God sustains me with something better than daily manna and the

syndrome is poorly understood. For various reasons, minor physical trauma, usually to an extremity (e.g., arm, leg, wrist), results in a persistent, excruciating pain syndrome. The pain is immobilizing and paralyzing. The temptation is to do nothing, to keep the affected limb as protected as possible—not to move it, not to touch it—because any movement or any touch can bring excruciating pain.

Ironically, the mainstay of recovery for reflex sympathetic dystrophy, from a purely medical perspective at least, is physical therapy. The sufferer gradually increases tolerance to the use of the affected limb. In other words, the very activity that produces the pain—movement, usage—becomes the very instrument by which the pain is reduced.

Living by faith is a lot like that—slow, persistent, daily, gradual movement towards the Lord and towards others. I am not sure what faith or repentance will look like for you, what specific hope of the gospel you need to embrace,

¹³ Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. "The Usefulness of the Cross," *Westminster Theological Journal* 41(2), Spring, 1979.

what actions or attitudes perhaps need to change. For some of you it may mean to continue doing what you're doing; that is, you are in the fire, you are in the furnace of chronic pain and yet you truly experience that God's power perfects in your weakness. For others it may mean facing head-on issues of anger or fear or anxiety or bitterness. It may require restoration in your relationship with the Lord or in your relationship with others. For those of you without chronic pain it means seriously praying

about your involvement and your ministry in that context. Realize that however the Lord would want you to reflect Him more fully in your thoughts, your emotions, and your actions, every step of faith that you take will serve in a positive way to modify and modulate that pain experience and will give you hope to continue on the journey between redemption and final rest.