

Don't Waste the Pain: Growing Through Difficulties

A sermon by David Lyons, presented at Little Chapel of the Hills on August 29, 2010

Pain is a gift that reveals and refines our habits, our relationships and our beliefs.

Intro: Although I've never met most of you, I know that many of you prayed for and with us as our son battled cancer then died. Thank you for walking with us as you have. You might wonder how we are doing now. You don't "get over" losing your 13 year old son. We are learning that grief becomes a part of you, either in a redemptive way or a destructive way. And it seems to us that every member of our family is experiencing redemptive grief. Over these last 2 years we've often heard others say, "I can't imagine your pain."

But many of you have suffered, are suffering or will suffer great pain. Your pain may be in a broken relationship, a broken marriage or broken home. It might be a child breaking your heart. It might be the pain of shattered dreams, or sudden loss of a job. Your pain might be the pain of rejection or failure or abuse. In this broken world pain is inevitable. But you have a choice as to how pain will shape you. I'm here to tell you that pain can actually become a gift... a gift that reveals and refines our habits, our relationships, our beliefs, and our view of God.

Today we will be looking primarily at the Book of Job. First we will see that...

1. Pain reveals and refines the habits of our hearts. Job had habits of the heart that prepared him for his trial:

Job 1:1 (NIV) In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil.

Job 1:5 (NIV) When a period of feasting had run its course, Job would send and have them purified. Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them, thinking, "Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts." This was Job's regular custom. *(Can you imagine preparing a burnt offering every time you thought one of your 7 sons might have sinned? That must have kept Job busy! The point is that Job habitually interceded for his children.)*

Job 1:20-22 (NIV) ²⁰ At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship ²¹ and said: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised." ²² In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.

In our case, we did not offer blood sacrifices for our children. That was cared for at the cross. But every time we celebrate a birthday in our house we review with that child how we gave them back to God at birth. And when it became evident that our son Ian might die, we were reminded that he belongs to God. And the habits of our hearts were revealed. Recently I took a class in digital

storytelling in which I created a video that shows how the habits of our family were revealed and refined through our pain.

[Watch the “Growing through Pain” video here](#)

[Video script] Each day from my office window I look at the ridge where I last hiked with my 12 year old son Ian. There we had talked over the temptations and pressures that he would face as a young man. But late one night I found myself sitting beside Ian’s hospital bed.

I will always remember February 4th as one of the most difficult days of my life... the day that I learned that Ian has cancer. I don’t think that I’ve ever cried so much in one day or even in a week. I feel numb. My prayers are minimal...just breath-prayers for the most part...sighs toward God. I know that God is hovering here, watching over us. What I want most is beyond our human reach. Yet is physical healing what I want most? No. More than anything I want Ian to know God deeply. So Lord, I pray that through this You and Ian will become intimate friends. Help him to learn to pour out his heart to You. Help me to lead him in this by example. I’ve prayed regularly that he would come to know Your Father love through me. May it be so even now!

In the coming months I often found myself marveling at Ian. I was proud of him as he shrugged off brutal chemo to lead his friends on new adventures. I was relieved as his courageous love won over the heart of his older brother who used to hate him. He was becoming the man I had longed for him to become, and my family was becoming the family I had longed for us to become. I crested the roller coaster of emotions as Ian was declared cancer free...then plunged back into desperation when it resurfaced in his brain. I received the dreaded call: Ian had a grand mall seizure. He collapsed into the arms of a friend. I needed to meet the ambulance at the hospital.

Our hope soared again when the cancer began to recede and Ian began to walk and talk once again. Our faith picked up steam like a locomotive as we prayed. Then he died. The next day we sat down at the dinner table with Ian’s brothers and sisters and did not leave for many hours. In the midst of my searing grief another feeling emerged. I was incredibly proud that none of my children were backing off from God or from one another. Together we wrestled with the hard questions. What in the world was God thinking? Would we trust Him with our prayers again? Ian’s older brothers agreed that Ian had somehow become their older brother, their hero. And I saw that somehow through our pain we are becoming more rather than less.

In our pain we have a choice to make. Will we become less or more? Will our pain merely expose our heart, or also enrich it? That video also illustrates how...

2. Pain reveals and refines our relationships.

One of the things that we observed as we got to know the families of other children with cancer is that pain often destroys relationships. Many marriages fall apart under the strain. Take a closer look at how pain impacted Job’s relationships. Guys, imagine coming home from a hard day at work hoping for some comfort from your wife. Job’s wife had some comforting words for him: “Why don’t you just curse God and die!” ...But let’s not be too critical of her. We lost just one son. Her

mother's heart had just been ripped from her chest, losing 7 sons and 3 daughters in one day. Grief can put a terrible strain on relationships.

Job's friends were more comforting... at first.

Job 2:11-13 (NIV) ¹¹ When Job's three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite, heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him. ¹² When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads. ¹³ Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.

But they could not resist the temptation to analyze why these tragic things had happened to him. They were afraid that if pain could come to Job, it could come to them as well. They desperately wanted to find an explanation that made them feel more comfortable. So they began to suggest that surely Job had done something to bring this on himself.

Yes, pain does tend to unmask our relationships. But pain ought to also mature our relationships. Many of us fear that our friends will respond like Job's friends did. So we hide our pain. But hiding is a big mistake. Rather, when we are in pain we need to give the Body of Christ the opportunity to truly live like the Body of Christ.

Imagine getting your fingers caught in a car door. The nerves in your hand immediately share your pain with the other members of your body. Your adrenal gland instantly puts the entire body on high alert. Your voice sounds the alarm. Your knees buckle in sympathy. Your heart pumps extra supplies to the site. Your other hand gropes for a way to relieve the pain. This is vivid picture of every member of the body working together in response to one member being in pain. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with 1 Corinthians 12:26 (NASB)

That's the way the body is supposed to act. But what if you caught your hand in the door and you felt no pain? When members of the body fail to communicate pain to the rest of the body, that's a serious problem! That's one of the most serious symptoms of leprosy. A healthy response to pain is to share your pain with others so that they can do their job. "Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them, and those who are ill-treated, since you yourselves also are in the body." Hebrews 13:3 (NASB)

- Remember the sick, as though in the hospital with them.
- Remember the broken families, as though your family was broken.
- Remember the unemployed, as though you yourself had lost your job.
- Remember the abused, as though you had been abused.

When my sister Linda was first diagnosed with cancer she was not experiencing healthy relationships with her church, a church very much like this one. She and her husband had experienced lots of rejection and pain there. But she chose to share her pain anyway. And later she wrote this:

I remember a dream from 7 ½ years ago. I was on my back but moving along, not under my own power, but as though weightless. Looking over my shoulder, I could see many, many people. They were underneath me, holding me aloft over their heads, with their uplifted hands and arms. It was almost like a celebration! They were singing and praising God as they carried me across an empty hill, the same hill where our little church now stands. My feet could not touch the ground; there was no need. I relaxed. They did all the work for me, and I was able to rest knowing they would never let me fall. When I woke up, I was filled with peace. It turns out it wasn't a dream after all. The saints who prayed for me were those people who carried me. Now they are the ones who praise His name for the work he has done in me.

Those around you can only love you as much as you let them love you. Jesus let Mary anoint his feet with her tears and perfume, and she was preparing him for burial. In our case, one of Ian's greatest legacies is how our family has learned to both give and to receive love from one another. Don't wait for those around you to become perfect before you trust them with your pain. Give them an opportunity to grow into acting like the Body of Christ should act. But regardless of how those around us respond...

3. Pain reveals and refines our core beliefs. When you get on the bathroom scales in the morning they tell you the truth. (Unless you have a spouse like me who sneaks up behind you and adds a few pounds with his toe.) Generally the scales tell you what's really going on with your body... and generally pain reveals what's really going on deep in your heart. It flushes your core beliefs out into the open.

That's what happened to Job. He had lived a blameless and upright life, but what came out of his heart in response to pain was a mixed bag.

"Though He slay me, I will hope in Him." Job 13:15 (NASB)

"Then these three men ceased answering Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes." Job 32:1 (NASB)

What will come out of your heart under the pressure of pain? One of the primary things God does through pain is He breaks our self-righteousness and self-sufficiency. And we fight it, hard.

There is a compelling scene in the movie *The Abyss* that illustrates how desperately we resist this. The entire film takes place deep under water. There is an accident and the survival of the underwater crew depends on the captain diving deeper than conventional equipment will allow. He has to use experimental equipment which enables him to "breathe" liquid oxygen. The camera zooms in on his face as his helmet fills with liquid. He comrade assures him it will be OK. "Remember, you breathed liquid for 9 months in your mother's womb!" That makes some sense, but you see the terror on his face as he "inhales" liquid, literally drowning himself to survive. For a moment he convulses violently because it feels so unnatural. Then he recovers and begins breathing the liquid and signals through a computer, "This is weird. You should try it!"

That is what it feels like to relinquish control and to enter into moment by moment surrender and dependence on God. It can feel like dying. No wonder God has to force our hand. (Luke 9: 23-24)

As I reflected on this, in the midst of our trials with Ian I wrote this in my journal. For some this will be alarming. Others will think, "Finally, someone said it!" Either way, we each need to wrestle with the core beliefs revealed in this journal entry.

Yesterday I was reminded that it seems important to many to say that God would never hurt us. That line of thinking concerns me deeply, because it sets up people to become disillusioned with God... or with those who teach such things. It also concerns me because it requires disregarding so much of how God reveals himself in the Scriptures. And it touches on an open nerve for me as we walk through painful circumstances with our son. Has God forgotten us? No! Is God mad at us! I don't think so. This brings me back to something that has become more and more precious to me: 'Seasoned Trust'. Naïve trust says, "God will always work out things the way I want them to be. Notice the big "I" in that sentence. Seasoned Trust says, "God might hurt me, but I trust Him anyway." Why would I trust Him anyway? I've seen so much of His love and goodness in the Scriptures and in my life. So the torrents of pain have to flow around those immovable rocks. Trust is the cord that keeps me lashed to the mast as the hurricane seems to be tearing everything else from its moorings. Trust enables me to trace the ways of God's decisions. Trust keeps hope alive and even eager as it waits. Trust nurtures and protects my memory of what is true and right. Trust protects my longing for God when it might have been extinguished. Trust strengthens my spirit to keep looking for God when He seems so far away.

What core beliefs are being revealed and refined through your pain? You see...

4. Pain reveals and refines our view of God Himself. Job was the godliest man in town.

In fact he was the godliest man of his generation. But Job did not really know God until he went through pain. Job experienced a head on collision between what he thought he knew about God, and who God really is. And in the end he said:

"I have declared that which I did not understand, Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.... I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees You" (Job 42:3, 5)

God has many ways of revealing Himself. And God is in charge of how He reveals Himself. Sometimes He reveals Himself through incredible miracles, and sometimes through incredible pain.

About a year ago my daughter Nicole Lorelei was in Mozambique serving as part of a team planting churches in Muslim village. One day they drove a flatbed truck into a remote village and asked the people to bring out their sick and lame and blind so that they could pray for them. The village chief himself came for prayer, because he had been deformed through a machete accident. They prayed, and God healed him. Later that night at the chief's invitation they showed the Jesus film and the whole village opened their heart to Jesus.

About that same time a very different story was unfolding in another Muslim village in Senegal. Our friends Jeff and Iris were visiting the village imam or spiritual leader. They learned that his wife was sick and prayed that God would heal her. Instead she got sicker, and our missionaries stepped in to care for her at great personal sacrifice. In the coming weeks the villagers would stop the missionaries and say, "Thank you for what you are doing for the imam's wife. What you are doing for her you are doing for all of us." Later Jeff overheard the imam saying to another imam, "I've

never seen love like this.” Sadly, the imam’s wife died and at her funeral the imam broke down in tears as he tried to thank Jeff and Iris for their love. The imam decided to stop teaching the Quran and return to farming. And now he is playing a key role in the progress of the Gospel in his village.

In one case God revealed himself through a miraculous healing. In the other he revealed Himself through miraculous love in the face of incredible pain. We’d all rather get to know God through miraculous healing. But God is in charge of how He reveals Himself.

A few weeks ago I sat shucking corn with two of my brother in laws. One has a wife who is battling cancer. The other has a daughter who is battling cancer. As we talked about our common experience we were surprised at one unexpected thing that all three of us are experiencing: transformation of our personal worship. Since Ian died I rarely worship without tears. But they are usually not tears of grief. Rather they are tears of wonder because knowing that Ian is in heaven singing somehow transports me into heaven as I imagine him worshipping with me before the throne.

This is not automatic. Many people just get mad at God when He does not play by their rules. Job struggled with that. But in the end he stopped arguing with God and just paused and really looked at Him. I’m finding that now I spend less time talking about God and more time talking to Him and worshipping Him. Like Job I say that I used to know God by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see Him as never before.

Close: We’re going to close by listening to a song that will help you to reflect on what you’ve heard today. You may be in pain right now. Or this message may be preparing you for the time when pain arrives on your doorstep. Either way, remember that pain is a gift that discloses and develops our habits, our relationships, our beliefs and our view of God. Consider that as you listen to this song...

When the Time Comes

by Avalon

For every soul there is a midnight
When it's silent in the room but loud inside
You lie awake what seems like forever
And you wrestle with the big stuff that cannot be denied
All of life has led you to this moment

When the time comes
And the games are finally over
There's no more pretending
All charades are done
And the time comes

When the soul is finally ready
You know the truth and
This time you don't run
God is waiting there, you'll find
When the time comes

For every soul this is a dawning

When we see there's more it life than we believed
Faith is that one road that's left to travel
But it means we have to start to trust what we can't see
Then at last we chose to take that first step
He'll rush He'll reach He'll run He'll do
Anything to get to you