

The Nerves and Pain: Trusting God When It Hurts

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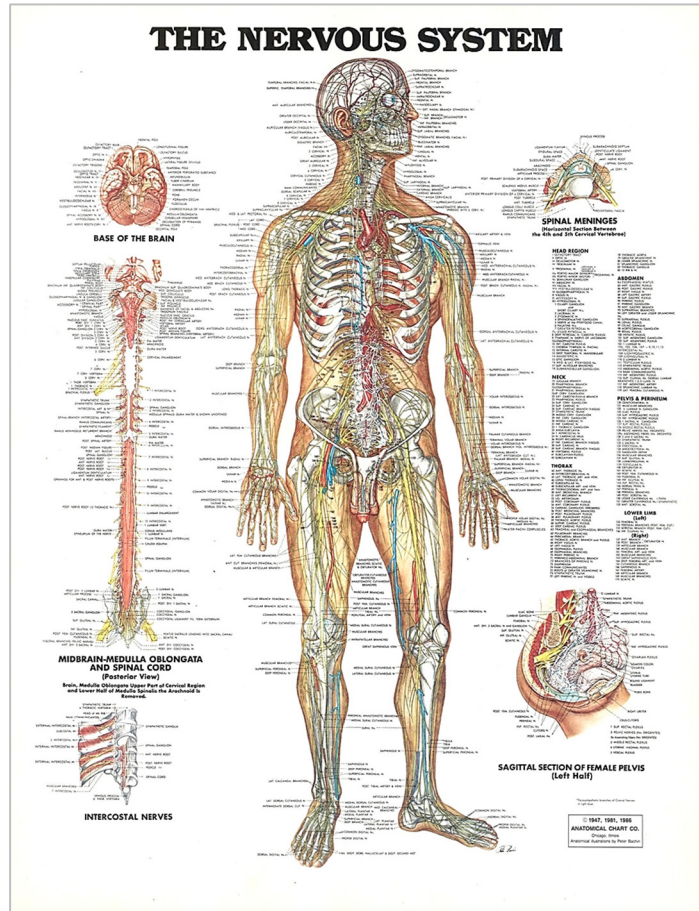
"Spine Vertebrae Art" by Koby Feldmos

Prayer of Illumination

Holy God, you sent the Holy Spirit to your disciples
so they would have a helper and a guide at all times.
Send us again your Holy Spirit to be our helper and guide as well.
May your Spirit pour light into our hearts
and make our spirits glow in your glory.
Help us to understand and bask in your word, oh Lord.
Illuminate our hearts and minds with your Holy Spirit. Amen.

Background: Nerves and Pain

Pain is both necessary for our survival and entirely unwelcome.
Pain consumes us and confounds us.



The brain and spinal cord make up the central nervous system. The nerves that radiate out from this are the peripheral nervous system. The somatic nervous system controls voluntary actions. The autonomic nervous system controls those things you do automatically, such as your heartbeat. The peripheral nervous system can heal and regrow, but the brain and spinal cord not quite so well.

Pain begins with nerve endings known as nociceptors that respond to three kinds of pain stimuli: thermal, chemical, and mechanical. Nerve signals travel at about 270 miles per hour. But we also have reflexes to help out, reacting even before the nerve signals reach your brain—like pulling away from a hot dish in the microwave. Pain is our friend and a great teacher—reminding us not to walk barefoot on hot cement or letting us know something's wrong—physically or emotionally, so we can rest and heal. We do well to listen to our pain.

There is some pain that's pleasurable—like aching muscles after a good hike or the pain of slipping into the piping hot jacuzzi waters that hurt, then soothe. Then there's inexplicable pain like phantom pain—pain experienced in a limb that's been removed by amputation or accident. There's no pain

center in the brain. So how is it that we experience headaches and migraines? That pain actually comes from surface areas in your scalp or face, which have many pain sensors, unlike the brain. Our organs also don't feel pain, so we experience referred pain, like the pain from heart disease that can be felt in the arms, neck, or jaw—not the heart itself.

Pain is intensely personal and private. Bill Bryson defines pain as:

anything that hurts, or might hurt, or sounds if it might hurt, or feels as if it might hurt, whether literally or metaphorically.

So pain covers pretty much any bad experience we might go through in life—anything from a bullet wound, to back pain, to the heartache of a broken relationship. Pain can move from being good (acute pain) to being chronic pain—pain that just stays and stays and stays, and never goes away. Chronic pain is like the volume dial being stuck at the highest level—where you just can't turn down the blaring music that won't stop pulsating and pounding in your ears 24-7. At any given moment 40% of Americans—100 million people—are experiencing chronic pain.

French novelist Daudet gave one of the most eloquent and heartbreaking descriptions of chronic pain ever in his novel *"In the Land of Pain"* saying it left him:

"... deaf and blind to other people, to life, to everything except my wretched body."

There is a point where pain becomes pointless. Cancer pain is a case in point. Cancer is generally painless in the early stages—when pain would really help to reveal something's wrong.

But then cancer pain is often extremely painful when it's too late to be useful. Medicine still struggles to help alleviate pain. The best pain drugs aren't all that effective, with 75 to 85 percent of people getting no relief from them at all. With the opioid crisis that's for the most part only a problem in America, about 2 million Americans are thought to be opioid addicts. Another 10 million are users and about 45,000 Americans die every year from opioids.

Depression and worry intensify our pain. However, pleasing aromas, soothing images, enjoyable music, and tasty food can ease pain. Exercise, healthy eating, prayer, and meditation are healthy ways that can decrease our pain.

Which leads us to our Scripture reading today from *Psalms 6*. No other portion of Scripture gives a clearer picture of the frailty of our earthly existence than *Psalms 6*. For the Jewish people, *Psalms 6* is prayed every weekday morning in the daily prayer liturgy. It is a lament psalm that calls on God for help in the midst of pain. The Psalms often purposely keep the details of trouble open-ended so they can be applied to a variety of situations. In *Psalms 6* various troubles are alluded to: illness, pain, sleeplessness, relational conflict, an uneasy conscience.

You see physical pain and emotional pain are inter-connected. They wear us down—emotionally, physically, spiritually. In times of suffering, if you have no words, this Psalm gives words to your prayers. There's lament, but then towards the end, there's an outburst of defiant faith. Notice the first word uttered in the Psalm is "Lord." In other words, there's hope, even in hopeless situations. For in *Psalms 6*, God is the problem... and God is the solution.

Let's hear now the Word of the Lord from...

Psalm 6:1-10 (NRSV)

A Psalm of David.

¹ O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger,
or discipline me in your wrath.

² Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing;
O Lord, heal me, for my bones are shaking with terror.

³ My soul also is struck with terror,
while you, O Lord—how long?

⁴ Turn, O Lord, save my life;
deliver me for the sake of your steadfast love.

⁵ For in death there is no remembrance of you;
in Sheol who can give you praise?

⁶ I am weary with my moaning;
every night I flood my bed with tears;
I drench my couch with my weeping.

⁷ My eyes waste away because of grief;
they grow weak because of all my foes.

⁸ Depart from me, all you workers of evil,
for the Lord has heard the sound of my weeping.

⁹ The Lord has heard my supplication;
the Lord accepts my prayer.

¹⁰ All my enemies shall be ashamed and struck with terror;
they shall turn back, and in a moment be put to shame.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – Trusting God When It Hurts



Blaise Pascal was a famous mathematician, scientist, inventor, and philosopher. Not long after having a near death experience, Pascal in his early 30s had a dramatic two-hour encounter with God, known as "Pascal's Night of Fire." He wrote of his experience, and literally sewed it into the liner of his coat to carry the experience with him. It was found in the coat he was wearing when he died eight years later.

Here is "The Memorial," his attempt to describe the experience:

*The year of grace 1654, Monday, November 23rd.
From about half past ten at night until about half past midnight,*



FIRE.

GOD of Abraham, GOD of Isaac, GOD of Jacob not of the philosophers and of the learned. Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace. GOD of Jesus Christ. My God and your God. Your GOD will be my God. Forgetfulness of the world and of everything, except GOD. He is only found by the ways taught in the Gospel. Grandeur of the human soul. Righteous Father, the world has not known you, but I have known you. Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy. I have departed from him: They have forsaken me, the fount of living water. My God, will you leave me? Let me not be separated from him forever. This is eternal life, that they know you, the one true God, and the one that you sent, Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ. I left him; I fled him, renounced, crucified. Let me never be separated from him. He is only kept securely by the ways taught in the Gospel: Renunciation, total and sweet. Complete submission to Jesus Christ and to my director. Eternally in joy for a day's exercise on the earth. May I not forget your words. Amen.

Psalm 6 is a cry of the soul, like Pascal's "Night of Fire."

You see, the good news is, God gives us permission to be human, to feel. We can vent when we're hard-stricken. When we're in dire straits and the pain is unbearable, it feels like everything and everyone is against us—including God. And so we cry out to God for mercy. We keep the conversation going, keep talking to God.

*Lord, don't rebuke me in your anger,
or punish me in your wrath.
If I did something wrong, please let me know.*

*Have mercy on me for I languish.
God, my body's racked with pain.
I'm feeble, frail—worn out from groaning.
My spirit's raw and ragged.
I don't know how long I can take this.*

*My pillow and sheets are drenched in sweat,
Puddles of tears are on my couch.*

*My eyes are blurry from grief.
My bones ache.
My soul shakes with horror.
My enemies hound me—taken years off my life.*

*Strength fails me.
My life's crumbling to pieces.*

There are times in life where self-help and good advice aren't going to get you anywhere. Your plans are shattered. Things you've taken for granted, gone. We've all had or will have dark nights of the soul where we grieve the loss of health, the loss of a relationship, the loss of a peace we once knew, the absence of God, the demons of addiction haunting us, or the silence of a loved one deceased. And so we echo the psalmist: *How long? This has been dragging on too long. How long? When will you act, God?*

We've heard it said, "all of God's delays are maturings." But in our *Psalm 6* moments, that can be a tough pill to swallow.

*For in death there is no remembrance of you;
Who can praise you from the grave?*

The psalmist is desperate. We're desperate, appealing to God's self-interest: God you can't receive my praises from the grave. I know you want me to praise you, help me.

The grave. The Hebrew word is "*Sheol*." It's very mysterious. *Sheol* in the Old Testament is basically the "Realm of the Dead," described as a dusty, shadowy place for all who die. Sometimes the Hebrew

Scriptures personify the grave as a living shadow of death that creeps and nibbles at life. Other places describe it as a land with no land—"no land's land." Basically, the psalmist is saying:

Let me not sink into death. I've found joy and significance in my life by praising you.

We want to live because that's all we know. It's the survival instinct kicking in when we're at the brink of death.

Psalm 6 makes me think of "The Man of Sorrows," Jesus of Nazareth who wept. I picture Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, distressed to the point of death. Pleading for God to take his cup from him. And then he surrenders to the Father's will—

Thy will be done, not mine.

And then his suffering on the cross—

My God, my God—why hast thou forsaken me?

And yet there's hope here, even in the horror.

The Psalm that Jesus quotes from the cross, *Psalm 22*, concludes not with *My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me?* but with praise and worship:

*God has not despised nor abhorred
the affliction of the afflicted;
neither has he hid his face from him;
but when he cried to him, he heard.*

There are just a few glimmers of the afterlife in the Old Testament that eventually shimmer and shine in the New Testament. *Psalm 139* reminds us that even God is in the realm of the dead. We read of the prophet Elijah who was taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire. And the prophet Isaiah who says:

"Your dead will come back to life, their corpses shall rise again. Wake up and sing you dwellers in the dust." (Isaiah 26:19)

And then in the Second Testament, these moving words in Revelation:

"And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things have passed away... Behold, I make all things new." (Revelation 21:4-5)

And so, a radical reversal takes place, a sudden lifting of the head, even on the psalmist's sickbed. He speaks in faith. A prayer of trust in God's goodness is offered, in the midst of life's badness. Victory is to come. Deliverance is at hand.

Return Lord!
Rescue me! Heal me.
Deliver me by your steadfast love.
Depart from me evildoers!

I love how one scholar describes this beautiful turn:

"...as the psalmist progressed in prayer, he eventually reached a point where faith and confidence outstripped anguish and despair."

You see this over and over in the Psalms—faith and confidence outstripping anguish and despair. That's why I love the Psalms. With God there's a sudden access of hope. A heavenly touch on earth. Answered prayer. Our face alights with assurance, even in the crucible. Or as Pascal put it: FIRE.

Don't give up praying. Refuse to let go of the hem of Jesus' garment. Keep crying out. Keep holding tight to God's promises. Trust—no matter what. Prayer is a cry of hope, even in the suffering. So remember, don't forget the memory of God's faithful love. Count and recount God's tender mercies. Remembering is an act of worship, a spiritual discipline. For God's covenant people, the sick bed, even the death bed, becomes a place of trust and hope.

The Lord heeds the sound of my weeping. God hears my prayer We can rise in power and we can rest in peace. Whether we live or whether we die, we belong to God.

Amen.

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