

## Pain: The Gift Nobody Wants

Written by Bob Stone

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Many years ago I read an article in Christianity Today that was adapted from a book entitled "Pain: The Gift Nobody Wants." I have for some time been interested in this subject, but it is especially appropriate now because so many of my church family are receiving that unwanted gift. A number of my friends have family members who have died; and there have been many sicknesses, cancers, financial struggles, emotional upheavals, and relational and family dysfunctions in the lives of those I love as well. I've also observed that pain hasn't always come from the obvious sources. Sometimes it emits from affluence and overindulgence. These have also yielded painful fruit in us and in our culture. As a result, I have been tempted to say to God, "please, stop the pain." But I have caught myself and not prayed that prayer. My experience is that pain (even though we seldom understand it's purpose) need not be a doorway to despair, but it can be an opportunity for beauty to grow in us.

How should we respond to the pain around us? Think for a moment about the life of Solomon. His experience parallels many in our culture. Having tried numerous projects and pursuits, none of which yielded any lasting satisfaction, Solomon floundered. His potential pleasure left him with gnawing emptiness and pain. Life seemed terribly boring and empty. But then he caught a brief glimpse of the purpose in it all. That occurred when he mentally slipped above the sun, beyond the earth, and caught a ray of hope from God's vantage point. His new perspective is described in Ecclesiastes 3:11—*"He has made everything beautiful in its time."*

This "interlude," though brief and rare for Solomon, brings into perspective something he had missed in his search for purpose and direction—beauty is made by God, and on His timetable.

Likewise, as long as we are connected only to an earthly perspective, we will experience a dull, predictable, routine and possibly a painful lifestyle whether we like it or not. But God has designed this life to be ultimately beautiful *"He has made everything beautiful in its time."* As Christ followers, even though our lives may sometimes look like a confused collage of clashing colors, and even though the experience of that clash may cause us great pain; if we are able to step back and consider our experience from God's vantage point, we would see that God's plan is an ordered mosaic of complementary hues. "

*For we are God's workmanship (His poem, His masterpiece) created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do"*

--Eph. 2: 10.

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From our perspective we see only the externals, the painful process in which we are involved. On the other hand, God sees the internal result which comes at the end of that process. We see pain as an intruder, an enemy, but God sees it as the brush, the sculpting tools for the masterpiece. Now, obviously everything is not beautiful at all times, but in its own season everything will be beautiful for the believer, if God is given control of the process.

Now if we were given the right to choose, we would have no unpleasantness at all in life, but the truth is if we only had the positive, we would be ruined. God knows that people, who are protected from everything, invariably end up impossible to live with—they are selfish, cruel, vicious, shallow, and unprincipled. Paul Brand says: “I now detect a profound uneasiness in the United States and much of the West. The good life does not seem quite so good as promised. Critics worry that Americans are becoming soft and weak, a ‘culture of complaint’ more liable to whine about a problem or file a lawsuit than strive to overcome it. To me, at the heart of the issue lies a basic confusion regarding pain and pleasure. Affluence and overindulgence have made the modern industrialized West a difficult place to experience pleasure.” I would add, to experience real beauty.

Therefore, God sends pain and struggle in our lives in order for us to grow and become like Him—Rom. 8:28; James 1:2-4. So everything can be appropriate and helpful to us, even what appears to be negative. The negatives of life need not be curses and obstacles; eventually they can be transformed into something beautiful—our loss, our hospital experience, our failures, our brokenness, our battles, our fragmented dreams, our lost relationship, our heartache, our illness, the pain of our extended family; God means everything!

So let's not have a shallow concept of pain. Let's not long for everything to be smooth, pleasant. Let's not try to be in charge in order to limit the term of hurt or pain. If we want the beauty, we must have the pain. Here are the promises: *“And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen* --1 Pet. 5:10-11.

*“He has made everything beautiful in its time”*

—Ecclesiastes 3:11.