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Genesis 3:16-19

Twelfth Message

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THE GIFT OF PAIN

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

Last week the media reported that the FBI had reopened the case of the 1982 Tylenol poisonings. In that year seven people in the Chicago area died from taking Tylenol contaminated with cyanide. I remember that well for a couple of weeks later I arrived in this country on my first visit. The whole nation was gripped in fear. James Lewis, long considered the culprit, and the focus of the FBI's attention last week, was convicted only of trying to extort \$1 million from Johnson & Johnson to "stop the killing." This crime hit the country where it hurt. Family members took Tylenol to deal with the pain of losing a loved one only to die themselves. Johnson & Johnson recalled its product at great financial pain: there were an estimated 31 million bottles in circulation, worth over \$100 million. That's one bottle for every seven people in the country! Fear and hysteria brought great mental pain to the whole country. But the country recovered: tamper-proof bottles were developed, and now more Tylenol than ever is sold. Painkillers are a multi-billion dollar business, in which the United States leads the world.

America should be the happiest country on earth. It is officially founded on the "self-evident," God-given, "unalienable" right to pursue happiness. Yet there is a lot of pain in this country: physical, emotional, psychological. Despite the highest per-capita spending on health-care we rank near the bottom in the West on any measure of health. Despite massive consumption of painkillers the pain persists. Despite numerous counselors the anguish endures.

Many who have visited Third World countries on mission trips have been struck by how happy people seem, even though they live in relative poverty, with poor access to health care and no painkillers. Many of us know people who have remained remarkably joyful in the midst of great pain: they don't deny the pain, but the pain doesn't paralyze their lives. In short, there does not seem to be a direct correlation between pain, suffering and happiness.

We wish the pain would go away, but pain is valuable. It is God himself who inflicts pain upon the world. Though he does so in the context of judgment it is nevertheless a gift. That pain is a gift is a message we don't want to hear, but one we need to hear. Today I want to rehabilitate pain, not by removing it, but by showing its positive effects.

In our study of Genesis 3 we come today to God's judgment upon the woman and the man. Upon both of them he inflicts pain.

Judgment on the Woman

To the woman he said,

**"I will make your pains in childbearing very severe;
with pain you will give birth to children.
Your desire will be for your husband,
and he will rule over you." (Gen 3:16 TNIV)**

Before we turn to what the LORD God does say to the woman, we should note two things which he does not say: he neither blames

the woman nor curses her. God did blame the serpent: "Because you have done this" (3:15), and he will blame the man: "Because you listened to your wife and ate" (3:17), but he does not blame the woman. Primary responsibility for the catastrophe is placed upon the serpent, acting as Satan's agent, and upon the man.

God had cursed the serpent, subjecting him and the evil he represents to frustration and futility. Making no attempt to save him God consigned him to a dead-end in history. There is an end-point into which God will ultimately remove Satan and evil. But God does not curse either the woman or the man. Though life will not be easy for them, at this stage he does not intend that they reach a dead-end.

God's judgment upon the woman is two-fold: pain in raising children and discord in marital relations. In passing judgment upon the serpent God had announced that he would defeat evil through the woman's seed. We would expect therefore that God would facilitate the birth of this seed. Instead he hobbles the process. The procreation of children was part of God's creation purposes. When he created the man and the woman, he blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (1:28). Now, through God's grace, they will still have offspring, but it will be accompanied by much pain. Using the same sort of emphatic construction that he had used to invite the man to "freely eat" (2:16) and to warn him "you will surely die" (2:17), God tells the woman, "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing." In case she misses the point, he restates it, "with pain you will give birth to children." This pain affects the whole process of generating offspring: conception, pregnancy, birth, rearing. It is not simply that such pain is a consequence of the Fall, but that God deliberately inflicts the woman with pain. The subsequent narrative of Genesis shows that this is not just physical pain but emotional pain as well. Throughout Genesis the procreation of the woman's seed is wracked by pain.

One of the greatest of these pains is barrenness. Throughout the Old Testament God is repeatedly at work overcoming that barrenness to continue the line of the woman's seed. Through his prophets he announced that the pain of barrenness would be overtaken by birth pangs. Indeed birth pangs became a metaphor for the salvation that God would bring to his barren people. Yes, God inflicts pain upon the woman but out of this pain he brings redemption.

The disruption of the woman's life extends also to her relationship with her husband: "Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." What does the LORD intend by this much debated couplet? Help comes from looking at a very similar statement in the next chapter. Before Cain killed his brother Abel, the LORD asked him why he was angry:

"If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it." (Gen 4:7)

The last part of the two verses have identical syntax and vocabulary. To Cain he says, “to you its [sin’s] desire, but you will rule it.” To the woman he says, “to your husband your desire, but he will rule you.” His statement to Cain is easier to understand. Sin’s desire for Cain is a desire to master him. God warns Cain that he must not give way to this desire, but instead must master sin: he must resist sin’s evil urges, overcoming evil with good. Cain, of course, disregards God’s warning and allows sin to exercise mastery over himself. The parallel suggests that the woman’s desire for her man is a desire to master him. Contrary to most English translations, we should read the second statement as adversative and imperatival: *but he must master you*. The husband, who has failed to exercise leadership against the serpent, and who in the next verse will be blamed for obeying his wife, must act to exercise authority. Whatever this means it is clear that the harmony of chapter 2 is seriously upset. God created man and woman as equal but complementary. The man and the woman were alike except that he was male and she was female. Within this likeness there was an order: God had made the man to work and guard the garden; he had made the woman to be his helper and companion with no secondary status implied. But now the battle of the sexes had begun. The man had failed to act as guardian as his helper and companion was seduced by the evil serpent. Instead, he had yielded to her, for which God clearly blames him not her. The implication seems to be that this first-time failure of the man establishes a precedent for the woman to follow. Awoken to the possibility for self-centered independence the woman will try to repeat the trick; her desire will be to master her husband. He must respond adversely to exercise dominion over her. The marriage relationship, out of which the seed is born, will henceforth be adversarial rather than cooperative. This, too, is borne out in Genesis, especially in the lives of the patriarchs and their womenfolk. Abraham’s faithful walk with God is jeopardized by Sarah’s suggestion that he bear a son through her maidservant. Ominously, “Abram listened to the voice of Sarah” (16:2), and the Middle East has been in turmoil ever since. Isaac was mastered by his scheming wife Rebekah. Jacob’s body was the battleground between unloved but fertile Leah and loved but barren Rachel.

Here, too, it is surprising that God should allow his plan to defeat evil through the woman’s seed to be put in jeopardy by marital discord. But in both cases—the pain of birthing and raising children and the pain of marital strife—God makes it clear that the successful birth of the seed depends not upon human cooperation but upon his supernatural superintendence of the process. No matter how much barrenness, family pain and marital discord, God will ensure the birth of the seed who will deliver the mortal blow to Satan.

Judgment on the Man

To Adam he said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat of it,’

“Cursed is the ground because of you;
through painful toil you will eat of it
all the days of your life.

It will produce thorns and thistles for you,
and you will eat the plants of the field.

By the sweat of your brow
you will eat your food
until you return to the ground,
since from it you were taken;

for dust you are
and to dust you will return.” (3:17-19)

Again, God does not curse the man: he does not intend for the man to reach a dead-end. But just as he disrupted the woman’s world, so he disrupts the man’s world. Just as he inflicted pain on the woman, so he inflicts pain upon the man, but in a different arena: that of his work.

Though God had put the man in the garden to work it, this work was not toil, nor was it to provide his food. It was his service within the LORD’s sanctuary. Here God provided his food: the trees from which he could freely eat. Because the man heeded the voice of his wife rather than the voice of God, because he ate of the one forbidden fruit instead of enjoying the great bounty of God’s provision, he loses access to that voice and that provision. Shortly God will expel him from the garden to work the ground (3:23). Henceforth he will have to work for his own food. Just as God hobbled the procreation of human offspring so he hobbles the man’s work for food. God does not curse the man or the woman, but he does curse the ground which the man has to work. The ground will yield food, but only reluctantly. Hard human labor will wrestle arable crops from the ground, but its natural produce will be thorns and thistles. The man has to eat, but it will be only through painful toil that he can provide for himself. Gone are the days when he enjoyed for free the rich bounty of God’s provision.

Man will experience this painful toil all the days of his life until he dies. The serpent which had assured the woman, “You will not certainly die” (3:4) was wrong. The LORD who had warned the man, “You will certainly die” (2:17) was right. Eating plunged the man and woman into spiritual death. At the end of their lives lies physical death. Death is the greatest pain of all. It is an undoing of life, a descent back into the dust from which the man was taken. Death invites the question, “Does life even matter?” If the man dies and returns to that from which he came, does his life have any meaning? Is he gone and forgotten? How can life have any meaning if death swallows it up?

Why Pain?

God inflicted the woman with pain in the realm of offspring and marital relations. He inflicted the man with pain in the realm of his sustenance and his very existence. He did not curse them, but this infliction of pain seems to be not far short of a curse. Why did God inflict pain upon both man and woman? I dismiss the idea that this was simply vindictive punishment. God’s judgments generally have a silver lining. It is very important to note that God does not curse the humans. He does not consign them to the same fate as Satan: fertility and frustration in the present and a dead-end in the future. He intends to defeat Satan and restore humanity to friendship with himself. And he will use pain as a tool to that end. Pain has a positive purpose: though it is given in the context of judgment it is actually a precious gift from God.

The woman will interact with her husband and bear children until the chosen seed is born, but will do so in pain. God will not allow her to find her ultimate rest and blessing in that. The man will work for his food and ultimately die, and will do so in pain, so that he never find his rest and blessing from the cursed ground. This deprivation of rest east of Eden is a gracious gift from God. It is not that God intends for the man and the woman always to live in pain.

What he does intend is that their life outside his garden sanctuary be one of pain, so that ultimately they not find their rest there.

In the rest of Genesis we see this working, albeit on a small scale. The woman had sinned by being self-focused. God uses pain to shift her focus away from self and onto himself. In the next chapter Eve names her first son Cain (*gained*), saying, “I have gained a man” (4:1). By the end of the chapter, after the pain of losing both Cain and Abel, she names her third son Seth (*set*), saying, “The LORD has set me a replacement child” (4:25). Pain has shifted her focus from self onto God.

In the contest between the unloved but fertile Leah and the loved but barren Rachel, the names they give their sons are God-focused. Out of their respective pain they cry out to God and he hears their cries. Leah names her first son Reuben (*see, a son*; sounds like “he has seen my misery”), “because the LORD has seen my misery”; and her second son Simeon (*heard*), “because the LORD heard that I am not loved.” Her fourth son, the one who will bear the seed, she names Judah (*praise*), saying, “This time I will praise the LORD” (29:31-35).

A similar thing happens with the man. In chapter 5 Lamech names his son Noah (*rest*), saying, “He will comfort us in the labor and painful toil of our hands caused by the ground the LORD has cursed” (5:29).

Eve, Leah and Lamech show that both men and women were feeling their pain. That was good: God wanted them to feel their pain. He had afflicted humanity with pain so that they feel it, and that, feeling it, they cry out to him.

Even death, the greatest pain of all, is a gift. God does not allow man to live forever in painful toil east of Eden. But what happens to the person when he dies? Is it all over? This question becomes particularly urgent just a dozen verses later when Abel is killed by Cain (4:8). How can life have any meaning if the one on whom God looks with favor is blown away? Or is it just meaningless? Indeed, Abel’s name (*Hevel*) means a puff of wind; it’s the word rendered “futility” or “meaningless” in Ecclesiastes. There is a hint of hope in the genealogy of chapter 5 where, amidst the repeated refrain, “then he died,” we find that Enoch, who “walked with God” “was no more, because God took him away” (5:24). Yet the other faithful people in the Old Testament who walked with God died, all except Elijah. What happened to them? It slowly becomes clear in the Old Testament that Death—also known as the Grave, the Pit, or Sheol—is not the end. God will release the righteous from Sheol in resurrection.

Pain Today

So far we have looked only at the Old Testament. What about pain today, especially for the Christian? Does God take away all our pain now that we are in Christ? It is true that Christ makes a great difference. The promised seed has been born. Through all the woman’s pain and marital strife, God ensured that the seed would be born. No amount of pain or discord could prevent that. The glory for this belongs to God not to mankind. And yet, as we affirm in the Apostles’ Creed, this promised son “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; he descended into hell.” The woman brought pain upon herself because she asserted self. God allowed his Son to face incomparable pain and suffering even though he had abdicated self in self-giving love to his Father. He allowed his Son to experience the unspeakable pain of separation from his Father, to die at the hands of evil, and to enter Sheol, the realm of the dead. What would God do? Is all life meaningless? The Son’s entry into Death is

a far greater problem than Adam’s entry into Death. But Death had no claim on this Son. God raised him from the dead, the firstfruits of those who will follow him in resurrection. At the center of God’s response to evil lies the pain, suffering and death of his Son. This was not sadism on the Father’s part nor masochism on the Son’s part, but a subjection of the Son’s will to his Father, an emptying of self that he might please the Father. The Father was well-pleased: in the resurrection he declared that life does matter.

In Christ God is reversing the effects of his judgment on the man and woman. Through this one seed God is birthing a new seed, those who are being reborn into Christ. Fractured relationships can be healed in Christ. He has set the model for what true relationships look like. The disrupted relationship of Gen 3:16 is just that: disrupted. It is not to be taken as paradigmatic of relationships in Christ. The new paradigm is given in Ephesians 5: mutual submission to one another, with the husband loving his wife self-sacrificially as Christ loves the church. Christ has set us the pattern for rule: self-sacrificial giving.

We might expect that new life in Christ would bring an end to our pain. But God seems to take a rather cavalier attitude to our pain. He doesn’t seem interested in giving us a pain-free life. But he is at work using pain to accomplish his purposes both in those who acknowledge him and in those who don’t. He uses pain to get our attention and to shape our character. As C. S. Lewis famously put it,

We can rest contentedly in our sins and in our stupidities...we can ignore even pleasure. But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.¹

Awoken, we cry to God. Our call to worship was Psalm 130: “Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.” It is so often true that we have to realize we’re in the depths before we cry out to God. By the fifth century the church had designated this one of seven penitential psalms used in confession of sin. Gregory the Great wrote that God uses pain to prick us until we weep tears of sorrow over our own sin and wretched condition. God then turns our gaze to himself so that our tears of sorrow are transformed into tears of appreciation for what he has done in Christ. But then, alas, we avert our gaze and focus on ourselves again, so that God has to prick us again to get our attention.

Most Christians don’t like the idea that pain doesn’t disappear when we come to Christ. We want a life like Jabez, whose mother named him Jabez, which sounds like the Hebrew for pain, saying, “I gave birth to him in pain.” Jabez cried out to God,

“Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain.” (1 Chr 5:10)

Bruce Wilkinson’s book about this prayer sold 9 million copies in two years and spawned a mini-industry. If we will but pray this prayer every day, he argues, we will break through to the blessed life. Unfortunately he doesn’t ask whether a prayer like this still has validity in the New Testament age. He advocates a simple “name it and claim it” “health, wealth and prosperity gospel” which bears no relationship to what I see in the New Testament or in 2000 years of church history.

The Christians whom I admire are not those who have prayed the prayer of Jabez, but those who have suffered considerable pain. Their pain hurt, but God has used the pain to shape them into beautiful,

humble, gentle, loving saints. I think of Bob Roe, a former pastor of PBC, who was given six months to live, but lived another seventeen years in constant pain. I think of the author Marva Dawn, who is afflicted with numerous serious health problems, but is one of the most joyful people I know. I think of a Chinese nuclear physicist whom I met here and then visited in Beijing; despite tremendous suffering during the Cultural Revolution his face was radiant. Rather, I should say his face had been made radiant through that suffering. God uses pain in the lives of his people to shape their character.

God uses pain to rob us of contentment east of Eden. He does not allow us to be fully at home in this world. He has made us for so much more. To quote C. S. Lewis again,

Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.²

God uses pain to rip open what Lewis calls “the inconsolable secret” in each of us.³ As Augustine said, our hearts are restless till they find their rest in God. As long as we do not know that rest, pain is a gift. The day is coming when God will remove all pain, but that will not be until he has removed all evil and brought us out of exile back to himself to live with him in his sanctuary. Then,

He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. (Rev 21:4)

The antidote to pain is not Tylenol. It's not relationships, or marriage, or family, or work. It's certainly not death. The antidote to pain is God. Our chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. God uses pain as a tool to keep us from ourselves, to keep us from enjoying lesser things too much, to keep us from being too easily pleased.

*The Lord bless you
and keep you;
the Lord make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you;
the Lord turn his face toward you
and give you peace. (Num 6:24-26)*

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2001 [1940]), 90-91.

2. C. S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory” (1941), in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2001), 26.

3. Lewis, “Weight of Glory,” 29.