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Pain and God's Power and Presence 2 Corinthians 12:7-10
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The Summer Olympics begin this week in China on 08/08/08. Reading some of the stories about the athletes, it is remarkable **the pain** they put themselves through in order to compete. Eric Adelson wrote the following on ESPN.com about US swimmer Michael Phelps, "Swimming might never be wildly popular in America. But for those who consider sports a test of human limits, there may be no more impressive feat than what Michael Phelps will do over nine days in August. If all goes well, he will swim eight finals (five individual, three relays) and 17 races overall, including prelims and semis, in a quest to become the only Olympic athlete to win **eight gold medals** at a single Games. Football, basketball, hockey and baseball players rest not only after games, but during games. Tennis and soccer players get days off between matches. Boxers get months. But Phelps? Phelps will burn a marathon's worth of calories in the pool **every day for nine days**, on his way to **swimming more than 30 miles**. He will weaken with every minute, stroke and breath. The threats will not.

THREAT 1 is PAIN. Phelps begins with the most difficult event: the 400 individual medley. The race begins with 100 meters of butterfly, in which he must propel his body out of the pool, over and over, until he feels as if he's doing squat jumps with two kids on his back. 1992 gold medalist Mel Stewart says. *"If you don't have a base of strength and stamina, you fade. You die."* Next, the backstroke. Lie on your back, put ankle weights on and kick for a full minute. That's what the backstroke feels like. By the end of these 100 meters, a swimmer's quads and abs are shot. The race is half over. Switch to breaststroke, Phelps' weakest. His arms will whine and the field will close in and someone might even pass him, as Ryan Lochte did in the trials. The freestyle leg will take anything Phelps has left. Many swimmers drive the final 25 meters without lifting their head to breathe, to wring the final tenths out of the clock. At trials, Matt Grevers saw spots and felt his consciousness start to slip away. Phelps broke the world record to barely win the event at trials, and he called it **"one of the most painful races of my life."** After this race at the Olympics he will have 15 races left. Between warmups, racing and warmdowns most mornings at the Games, **Phelps will swim roughly 4,000 meters—the equivalent of running 11 miles—by noon," nine days in a row.**

Michael Phelps and other Olympic athletes push themselves to and through levels of pain that most of us can't imagine, all in pursuit of records and medals, personal glory and national pride. That is **a type of pain that individuals choose to**

cope with in pursuit of a larger, desirable goal. This type of pain is not hard to deal with because we choose to endure it because of something we want.

There is another type of pain, and that is the pain – whether physical, emotional, or spiritual, *that life deals us, that is given to us*, that we have no choice about, and we have to cope with it as best we can if there is no way to get rid of it. A number of you have read the very popular novel *The Shack* that is about this type of pain. Like with an Olympic swimmer, if you don't have a base of strength and stamina and faith, you fade, you're in trouble.

The Apostle Paul had an experience with pain like this that he shares about in 2 Corinthians 12. Paul is upset that there are people in the church criticizing him, questioning his spiritual authority and muscling in on what he feels is his spiritual leadership turf so he drops his spiritual credentials so to speak relating an experience where he was caught up to heaven and had visions that he can't even express. At the same time that he had this peak spiritual experience, he had a hard physical challenge with pain that he interpreted as a way of keeping him humble. Paul says,

“Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was **given a thorn** (Greek - *skolops*) in my flesh, **a messenger of Satan, to torment** (Greek *kolaphizo*) me. **Three times** I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, ***“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”*** Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

When we hear about heaven in the Bible, our response is enthusiastic and easy, “Sign me up.” These words from Paul are not as easily nor readily embraced by most of us. We aren't enthralled with the prospect of pain, weakness, insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties. That doesn't sound appealing. We don't know exactly what Paul's thorn in the flesh was; he doesn't bother to explain it to the Corinthians because they presumably know what it is. The word in Greek which is translated as “torment” (*kolaphizo*) means “beating or rough treatment.” We tend to think more of psychological issues with a word like torment, but Paul seems to implying a physical issue. Whether physical or mental, pain is not fun to cope with as the astute Daffy Duck so eloquently states in a Warner Brothers cartoon, *“I'm not like other people, I can't stand pain, it hurts me!”* Paul wasn't too enthusiastic about it either and pleaded with the Lord three times to take the thorn, the pain, away, but it remained.

So Paul had to look for another answer, for a way to cope.

What is pain exactly? According to Hospice:

“Pain is a sensation that hurts. It may cause discomfort, distress or agony. It may be steady or throbbing. It may be stabbing, aching, or pinching. However you feel pain, only you can describe it or define it. Because pain is so individual, your pain cannot be “checked out” by anyone else. Pain may be acute or chronic. Acute pain is severe and lasts a relatively short time. It is usually a signal that body tissue is being injured in some way, and the pain generally disappears when the injury heals. Chronic pain may range from mild to severe, and it is present to some degree for long periods of time.”

Some of the Symptoms of Pain include:

Physical effects such as - nausea, headache, dizziness, weakness, drowsiness, or perspiration.

Emotional effects include anger, depression, crying, mood swings, irritability, even suicidal feelings.

Lifestyle changes may occur as pain may impact our work, recreation, interpersonal relationships, ability to get around, and self-care activities.

Chronic pain, pain which lasts beyond the duration of time that an injury needs to heal is a huge health problem impacting millions of Americans. A recent news report cited the soaring amount of prescription pain killers as a reason for the significant increase in overdose deaths.

Doctor Arthur Esswein wrote, “Pain is personal, pure, and encompasses an individual’s entire being: physical, mental, and spiritual. The perception of pain, how we cope with pain is modified - it’s made worse or better by several factors.

Fear, depression, anxiety, and isolation all make our experience with pain worse that is why professional torturers have used those techniques for centuries.

Doctors have used other techniques – knowledge, confidence, and sharing to help make pain better and more tolerable.”

In his book, *The Problem of Pain* (1940), **C.S. Lewis wrote, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."** *The Problem of Pain* is a very rational, logical, analytical examination of pain. However, after Lewis fell in love with Joy Gresham, she was diagnosed with cancer and after their brief marriage he was crushed by her death, then he wrote, *A Grief Observed*. That second book about pain wrestles with the question, “*Can a God who allows suffering be good?*” The first book is

from his head, the second from his heart. In both books, and the film *Shadowlands*, Lewis argues that the answer is yes. No one is more acquainted with pain and suffering than the Creator of the universe who sees every single person and his or her situation – this would literally be more than we can bear. It is hard enough for us to deal with our own pain and the very public situations we see in the media.

I'm sure many of you heard of the death on July 25 of Carnegie Mellon University computer sciences professor Randy Pausch at the young age of 47 (1960-2008). Randy Pausch was a charismatic young college professor who chronicled his battle with pancreatic cancer in a remarkable speech widely-known as "The Last Lecture." More than 10 million people have viewed the lecture on the Internet.

It all began with one, age-old question: What would you say if you knew you were going to die and had a chance to sum up everything that was most important to you? For Pausch, though, the question wasn't hypothetical. He had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer -- and given six months to live. Randy spoke movingly of how he was trying to create memories for Dylan, 6, Logan, 3, and Chloe, 18 months, and why he couldn't allow himself to wallow in self pity. "The metaphor I've used is ... somebody's going to push my family off a cliff pretty soon, and I won't be there to catch them. And that breaks my heart. But I have some time to sew some nets to cushion the fall. **So, I can curl up in a ball and cry, or I can get to work on the nets.**"

This response is crucial it seems to me in dealing with pain. We can curl up in a ball and cry and lament our fate and ask, "why me?" Or we can get to work on the nets, we can keep on living our life the best we can while we can. That is the crucial choice each of us has to make in dealing with pain of whatever kind and no one else can make it for us. *"His fate is, is our fate, but it's just sped up,"* said co-author Jeff Zaslow. *"He's 47, and we don't know when we're gonna go, but we all have the same fate. We're all dying, just like Randy is ... when we can see him, how he's traveling, it makes us think about how we're going to travel."*

Last spring, Diane Sawyer asked Pausch what was the best thing that had happened to him that day. He replied, *"Well, first off, I'd say the day's not over yet. So there's always a chance that there will be a new best."* ¹ His attitude in dealing with his pain was amazing in part because he took his focus off his pain and off himself and put it on others – his wife and children.

¹ From ABC.com **By GEOFF MARTZ, SAMANTHA WENDER and CHRIS FRANCESCANI**
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On his blog Randy Pausch wrote, "**We cannot change the cards we are dealt, just how we play the hand.**" One of his cards was painful - cancer. He didn't want that card. He could try to tear up the card and throw it away—like it didn't exist—it wasn't his—but the card was still his. Our "cards" belong to us, whether we want them or not, just like Paul's thorn in the flesh. As we go through life, the longer we live, we receive more cards - some are wonderful and happily received, and others are painful and catch us off guard, and we'd like to rip those up – the death of a loved one, a divorce, an illness or disease, abuse, chronic pain, the loss of a job. We may feel like it would be easier to have someone else's cards, but we truly don't know all the cards that someone else may have. We often have little control of what cards come our way; yet we are responsible for what we do with them. That is hard, but that is life – we don't ask for the painful cards, and yet we have to figure out what to do with them when we get them. In the film *The Princess Bride* – The hero Westley says, "*Life is pain, anyone who says anything else is selling something.*" Pain is a part of life and there is no getting around that.

Each of us is holding different cards today and we each have to decide what we will do with them. What did Paul do in this situation? **Three times** he pleaded with the Lord to take "the card of pain" away from him. We can pray and ask the Lord to heal or deliver us. Sometimes those prayers are answered. That is why we have a prayer list - we believe that prayer can make a difference in the lives of people. But sometimes like Paul and Randy Pausch, we are not made well; sometimes the opponent will be with us for the rest of our life or is too strong for us to beat. Our hope is like Paul, we can hear the words of the Lord speaking to us, "***My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.***"

Sometimes people associate pain with a lack of God's love, presence or power. Pain can make us think God doesn't care, isn't there, or is too weak to help us. **God's word is that when we are in pain, God's grace is sufficient for us.** The weaker we are, the less of our own strength that we have at any given time, the more God's power may be poured into us.

The 11th chapter of the book of Hebrews, is a faith hall of fame, filled with the names of people who endured all kinds of pain, torture, mocking, flogging, chains, imprisonment, stoned to death, killed by the sword, "destitute, persecuted, tormented – of whom the world was not worthy" (Hebrews 11:37b-38a). Yet these people of faith persevered, they did not give in to the pain, they held onto faith while God held onto

them. Jesus died on a cross, most of the apostles were martyred, Christians are still imprisoned and even martyred today. Thankfully these things have not been part of our experience, our pain is different, but we need to understand that pain is part of life; it is not unusual to life. We don't want to have a faith that is built on a sandy foundation that consists of health, wealth, and prosperity because those things can all be taken away. We want a faith that is built on the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit so that whatever happens to us in life, we can face it because God is with us.

If you think about the image of a deck of cards, the face of each card is different, but the back is the same. Maybe there is a sense in which God is like the back of the card, that God is present with us in every experience we have to endure, but we may have to take our focus off the pain every now and then and lay down our cards to look for the Lord and not just at our hurt. Paul said,

"Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. For when I am weak, then I am strong." Paul came to believe through his experience that when he was in pain or hardship that Christ's power rested on him and was present with him in a greater way and Christ's power gave him and gives us strength that we don't have merely in ourselves. In John's Gospel we saw some of the images Jesus gave us to remind us that he is bread when we are hungry, light in our darkness, the Good Shepherd who watches over us, the resurrection and the life who has conquered death – focusing on these images of Jesus are helpful in our pain.

The Lord's testimony to us is, "I am your friend so you do not have to face your pain alone. I will be with you forever and will not leave you or forsake you. I am familiar with pain and have suffered it myself. I am also a Healer and the Savior." The prophet Isaiah spoke about a suffering servant who was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief who endured pain for our sake. The pain that Jesus endured is more than any of us can fathom. The physical pain of being tortured to death on the cross was so severe that no one could endure it without eventually losing consciousness. Mentally, Jesus had to cope with knowing the physical suffering he would endure, the isolation and loneliness as most of the disciples fled in fear, we can't fully appreciate what it meant for Jesus to be separated from God by sin as he took the pain of all our sin in his body.

C.S. Lewis says in his poem "Love's as Warm as Tears" (Poems 124):

*Love's as hard as nails,
Love is nails:
Blunt, thick, hammered through
The medial nerves of One*

*Who, having made us, knew
The thing He had done,
Seeing (with all that is)
Our cross, and His.*

Ultimately, pain, even chronic pain, is temporary. It will not last forever. Other things like the steadfast love of a good husband and father like Randy Pausch, the faith of Paul and millions of other believers who cope with pain and even death, these things endure and remain. Here is a closing story: Although French painter Henri Matisse was nearly 28 years younger than fellow painter Auguste Renoir, the two great artists were dear friends and companions. When Renoir was confined to his home during the last decade of his life, Matisse visited him daily. Renoir, almost paralyzed by arthritis, continued to paint in spite of his infirmities.

One day while Matisse watched the elder painter working in his studio, fighting torturous pain with each brush stroke, he blurted out:

“Auguste, why do you continue to paint when you are in such agony?”

Renoir answered simply: **“The beauty remains; the pain passes.”**

And so, almost to his dying day, Renoir put paint to canvas. One of his most famous paintings, *The Bathers*, was completed just two years before his passing; 14 years after this disabling disease struck him.

Whatever cards we have been dealt and none of us has an equal hand, whatever pain each of us is carrying today, and for some of us it is substantial, there is a sense in which each day we are putting paint to canvas making the portrait of our life. Like a work of art, the love, dedication, and beauty that we put on the canvas of our life will remain, even after the pain, and we have passed on.