

## Christianity's a Pain

### Matthew 16:21-26 (NIV)

<sup>21</sup> From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. <sup>22</sup> Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" <sup>23</sup> Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." <sup>24</sup> Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>25</sup> For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. <sup>26</sup> What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?"

We have a lot of options when it comes to managing and reducing pain – everything from seeing a doctor, taking pain relievers or supplements, doing physical therapy, getting injections, maybe surgery, spending purposeful time relaxing, getting a massage, and much more. We try very hard to get rid of pain in our lives.

That idea may very well have been what Peter had in mind after he heard from Jesus' lips that he, Jesus, "must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." (verse 21) His response: Peter took [Jesus] aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" (verse 22) God forbid you suffer through this pain! Peter cared about Jesus. Jesus was to him, as he had just confessed, his Lord, his Messiah, his Savior, his God. Peter didn't want Jesus to go through that pain, and he didn't want to go through the pain it would cause him to see Jesus suffer and be killed.

We want to get rid of pain just like Peter. Your back is hurting, we tell you to take some pain pills or go see a doctor or a chiropractor. We tell you to go get surgery for that rotator cup bur or that failing knee. My friend is grieving the loss of a loved one, and I say, "Whatever you need, call me." Because I want to say or do something that will make their day just a little brighter, alleviate this pain just a bit or help take it away. Another one of my friends is suffering the pain of a toxic, abusive relationship, or maybe even just a relationship that brings a bunch of drama, and I tell them to get out of there, save yourself from the pain.

Get rid of the pain! That's a good, God-pleasing goal of life, right? God wants us to be happy, right? So, we should do whatever we need to do in order to get rid of pain, right? This priority, this goal, seems so natural, so self-evident.

Yet, what does Jesus say in response to Peter wanting Jesus and him to avoid pain? "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." (verse 23) Woah, Jesus. I'm trying to do something nice for you. I don't want to see you suffer. You shouldn't have to go through any pain, any suffering. You're God. You are all powerful. Why would you ever suffer? I want what's good for you, to avoid pain, and you call me out that I am satanic? That I'm a stumbling block? That I'm getting in your way? That I don't have the right concerns? Maybe I'm the only one really concerned about you as I'm the one trying to get rid of this pain for you.

While Peter is still reeling from Jesus' rebuke, Jesus continues with another shocking statement: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (verse 24) People, if you want to be with me, if you want to follow me, it's going to hurt. In following me, you are going to deny yourself, say no to yourself about certain things, things that would lead you away from me. So, to stay on this path with me, it's going to hurt... a lot, that saying no to yourself will be like the torturous capital punishment device of the cross.

Jesus is basically telling us: Christianity's a pain. So, what do we do with that? What do we do with pain?

About 2 weeks ago, I started to have pain in my shoulder blades. This is not uncommon to me since my stress tends to cause muscle knots there. I had options for dealing with the pain. I adjusted my office chair. That didn't work. I tried sleeping it off. That didn't work. I used my massage wand to work out the knots. That didn't work. I tried shoulder blade exercises I found online. That didn't remove the pain. I could have taken ibuprofen, but I know that doesn't get rid of the cause of pain, it just helps mitigate how much pain I feel. Finally, I scheduled an appointment with my chiropractor. Turns out I had 2 ribs out of place. He was able to put them where they were supposed to be, giving me immediate relief. The continued pain told me that something was wrong that wasn't being fixed. Pain kept sending the signal so that I would deal with the actual root cause of it.

We live in a world of pain, but that pain serves a purpose. God has our body send signals of pain to tell us that something's wrong and we need to figure out what's causing it and fix it. So, what's the overall root cause of our pain? It's sin. God did not make us as objects of pain, people who were meant to suffer. No, we caused the pain because we brought sin into the world. We chose not to listen to God. We went against better judgment. He told us that if we disobeyed, we would bring pain and death into our lives, but we did it anyway, and we keep doing it. We didn't deny ourselves.

And we keep indulging instead of denying ourselves. We do this because it gives us a shot of pleasure and seemingly lessens the pain just for a bit. And if it reduces pain, even if I know it's wrong, I justify it. It's the reaching for the comfort food that I know isn't good for me but it's okay because I want something that tastes good. Even when I don't have the funds, I buy that one more thing on Amazon because I think it will make me happier, take my mind off of my financial pains. Turning to pornography or sex outside of marriage because I want that pleasure right now to take away the pain of waiting to enjoy God's gift of sex in the place where he designed and blessed it – for marriage. Or I even avoid possible pain, such as not having the potentially uncomfortable and relationship damaging conversation of sharing Jesus and what he has done for us with others.

Please understand that using the blessings in this world to reduce our pain is a good thing, but when we start compromising our walk with God for the sake of reducing pain, there's danger in doing so. Jesus says, "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?" (verses 25-26) To indulge ourselves in what is wrong to get rid of pain is to exchange our soul for forever pain, separated from God.

So, we need to deal with what causes the pain, and that's exactly why Jesus told his disciples explicitly what he was doing. He did not come into the world to avoid pain for himself; he came to deal with the root cause of all our pain. He came to go through pain in order to reconcile us to God and bring us into a right relationship with him. Jesus didn't have to suffer. He could have stayed in heaven and left us to suffer through the messes we make with our sinful choices, for our lack of self-denial, how we have ignored his Word for the sake of reducing pain. But this pain-free life was not an option for him because he loves us. So, he denied himself, took up his cross, lived perfectly for us, and died for us.

Jesus' one-sided, all devoted love moved him to take on our flesh and blood and suffer. He denied himself the luxuries of heaven and instead experienced hunger, thirst, cold, heat, sleep deprivation. He suffered beatings, scourging, insults hurled at him along with the disdain of spit, and finally death itself. He suffered the shame of the cross, went through all that pain, so that our sins would be forgiven, canceled out, completely paid for by him. By denying himself and going through all that pain, Jesus has given to us a future life with him in heaven where is no longer any death or mourning or crying or pain, where nothing can hurt us ever again.

What do we do today with the pain of denying ourselves and taking up our crosses to follow Jesus? We recognize that the pain we have is because it hurts to say no to our sinful desires. Instead of avoiding that pain or choosing the sinful action to alleviate the pain, we take it because it means that we are on the right path of following Jesus. When it hurts to deny our sinful nature, that's a good kind of pain telling us that we are fighting the root cause of pain, fighting against sin. In denying ourselves, we take heart that this pain is temporary because Jesus denied himself, suffered through pain, to give us that forever life free of sin, free of pain.

Brother and sisters, this side of heaven, Christianity's a pain because following Jesus leads us to deny our sinful self. It's a cross to bear. It hurts. But we take on that pain because we know Jesus denied himself a pain free existence and endured the cross so that we would have the cause of all our pain taken away, that he by losing his life gave us a forever life with him free from pain. So we deny our sinful selves, take the pain, and follow Jesus. Amen.