

The Problem of Pain

by George H. Morrison

The problem of pain is a modern problem that is deeply connected to our new sense of the solidarity of life and the discovery of the full humanity of Jesus.

Scripture: Psalm 34:18, Isaiah 53:3, Matthew 25:36, Romans 5:3, Romans 8:18, 2 Corinthians 1:3, 2 Corinthians 12:9, Philippians 4:13, James 1:2, 1 Peter 4:13

Topics: "Suffering And Pain", "Faith And Hope"

Description

George H. Morrison preaches on the problem of pain, highlighting the modern sensitivity to suffering and the emergence of the question of why the righteous suffer. He explores three reasons for the increased awareness of pain: the ability to escape it, the solidarity of life, and the revelation of the humanity of Jesus. Morrison delves into the place of pain in human existence, emphasizing its deeper impact compared to joy and its role in life, growth, and purification. He also addresses the acceptance of pain as a means of fellowship with God and the purifying power of pain, shedding light on the suffering of the innocent and the Gospel's role in helping believers endure pain through faith in God's love, hope of immortality, and advancements in medical science inspired by Christ.

Transcript

THIS, AS You all know, is Hospital Sunday, when offerings are received for our local hospitals. It is that fact which I have had in view in choosing my subject. I have already spoken on the doctrine of the body, for it is with the body that medical science deals; not with the body, however, in a state of health, but with the body in a state of pain and sickness; and so I thought I would take this opportunity to speak on the problem of pain, a theme that reaches home to everyone. Now, please remember at the very outset that at the best I can only make suggestions. I am not so foolish as to imagine that I can settle this problem. I can only give you certain points of view, some thoughts that may flash a little light upon the darkness; but, at least, I can truly say that I shall give you nothing that has not come with comfort to myself.

Now the problem of pain, I think I may assert, is in its full intensity a modern problem. There is today a sensitiveness to pain which in past ages was unknown. When you go back three or four centuries, you read of the most excruciating tortures. And you say how cruel must men have been in those days, when they could actually use these frightful instruments. Well, of course, there was much cruelty about it, but remember there was also a certain callousness-an absence of that quivering sensibility which makes us shrink from suffering today. Still more conspicuously was this the case in the ancient world of Greece and

Rome. It was a cruel and a callous world. It was not alive to the mystery of pain. Even the author of the Book of Job, which deals with suffering, is not perplexed about the fact of suffering. It is the question why the righteous suffer that forms the burden of the Book of Job. The problem, then, is largely a modern one. It has become insistent in these latter days. Is it possible, do you think, to find the reasons that may have led to this emergence? Why, in other words, are we today more sensitive to pain than were men of years ago? Why do we dwell on it more, and feel its pressure more, than men seem to have done in the old world? Let me suggest to you three reasons that may help to account for that new sensibility.

The Pressure of Pain

In the first place, the keener sensitiveness to pain springs partly from our new power of escaping it. The fact that we can so often cheat it now has had the effect of calling attention to it. So long as anything is quite inevitable we grimly and silently accept it. Death is inevitable--no man can escape it--and yet you and I seldom think of death. But just suppose that someone were to come and tell us a secret for escaping death, would not the fact of death leap into prominence? So it is with the fact of pain. Men thought that pain was inevitable once. There it was, and one just had to bear it, and that was the end of the whole matter. But now, thanks to the discoveries of science, and to the wonderful appliances of Christian medicine, we look on pain in quite a different light. A doctor will actually come to you and say, "It is your duty not to suffer." I had a first-rate doctor who once said to me, "You have no right to suffer pain like that." And it is just this sense that pain is not inevitable, but may be relieved and avoided somehow, that has helped to call attention to its problem.

A second reason for the pressure of the problem is to be found in the new sense of the solidarity of life. We feel our kinship now with all creation in a way that was undreamed of once. Men, of course, have always recognized that there was kinship between them and the dumb animals. But, in bygone times, it was not of that they thought; it was rather of the chasm between man and beast. Now, thanks to the knowledge we have won, it is not on the chasm that thought is centered. It is on the wonderful closeness of the ties that link all living things into a unity. Now, the moment you have built that bridge, there comes galloping over it the form of pain. Pain is universal in the world; wherever there is life, there is suffering. And it is the new sense which we have gained of the suffering throughout the animate creation that has given to the matter a new prominence. You know how John Stuart Mill has dwelt on that. You know how Huxley has dwelt on that. They have taken the pain of bird, beast, and fish, and flung it in the very face of God. And what I say is that that new conception of the groaning and travailing of all creation helps to explain the pressure of the problem.

But there is another reason, it seems to me. It is not scientific; it is theological. It is the discovery we have made in these last days of the full humanity of Jesus. Can you detect the bearings of that upon the question? Let me try in a sentence to explain it to you. Well, so long as the faith was viewed as a body of doctrine, so long there was little room in it for pain. It was with sin it reached the love of God. But, the moment that out of the mist of ages there stepped the figure of the man Christ Jesus, in that moment there flashed upon the world the recognition of the fact of pain.

Here was the Christ, the very Son of God, and He was infinitely sensitive to pain. It was His passion to cure it when he met with it. For Him it was a terrible reality. And I suggest that it is the human Christ who has become so real to us today who has made real to a thousand hearts the problem of our human suffering. Men are not deeply interested, perhaps, in dogma now; but they are deeply interested in Christ Jesus. They want to look at the world through Jesus' eyes in a way that was never thought of in past ages.

And I think that when you get that standpoint, immediately, as in the days of Galilee, you are confronted not alone with sin, but also with the terrible spectacle of pain.

The Place of Pain

Now, to show you the place that pain has in our being, there are some facts I want to bring before you. And the first is that our capacity for pain is greater than our capacity for joy. You experience, for instance, a great joy. Does that prolong its sway through the long months? Do you not know how it exhausts itself, and dies, as Shakespeare says, in its own too much? But now you experience great pain, and I never heard that that must needs exhaust itself-it may continue with a man for years. That means that our capacity for pain is deeper than our capacity for joy. It means that we are so fashioned by the infinite, that the undertone of life is one of sorrow. And I mention that to show you how our nature, when you come to understand it in the deeps, is in unison with the message of the cross.

Another fact which we shall pick up as we pass is this, that pain is at the root of life and growth. It is not through its pleasures, but through its pains, that the world is carried to the higher levels. You remember how Burns wrote about our pleasures?

But pleasures are like poppies spread,

You seize the flow'r, its blossom is shed.

and that is not only true of men; it is true also of the progress of the world. It is through suffering that we are born, and it is through suffering that we are fed. It is through agony that we have won our property; it is through blood that we have reached our freedom. It is through pain infinite and unutterable, the pain which was endured by Christ on Calvary-that you and I are ransomed and redeemed. Now that is a fact; explain it how you will, and we are here to deal with facts. I do not deny that pain may be a curse--remember that it also is a power. We owe our laws to it, and all our art. We owe to it our immortal books and our salvation. We owe to it the fact that we are here and able to look the problem in the face.

The third fact I note is to me of the deepest significance. It is the tendency which men have always had to think of pain as acceptable to God. We talk of the duty of happiness till folk are almost tired of hearing of it. Now, not for a single moment would I question that it is our bounden duty to be happy.

But, how significant and singular it is that in every country and in every age men should have looked on suffering and pain as something that was acceptable to God. You have it in the Roman knight who, to appease the gods, leaped into the chasm. You have it in the Indian fakir who sits for years in an attitude of misery. You have it in the pilgrim to the shrine; in the hermit and in the lonely anchorite; in every saint who ever scourged himself, in every savage who has made his offering. Whatever else that means (and it means much else), it hints at something mysterious in pain. Men feel instinctively that in the bearing of it there is some hope of fellowship with heaven. You may despise the hermit, and you may flout the saint when the weals are red upon his back, but an instinct which is universal is something you do well not to despise.

The Purifying Power of Pain

That leads me to touch, just for a moment, upon the purifying power of pain, for that is more closely akin than we might think to the feeling that it pleases God. Now I am far from saying that pain always purifies. We have all known cases where it has not done so. We have known men who were hardened and

embittered by the cup of suffering they had to drink. But, on the other hand, who is there who has not known some life that was transfigured, not by the glad radiance of joy, but by its bearing the cross of pain? How many shallow people has pain deepened! How many hardening hearts has it made tender! How many has it checked, and checked effectually, when they were running headlong to their ruin! How many has it weaned from showy things, giving a vision that was fair and true, and steadying them into a sweet sobriety as if something of the unseen were in their sight! Pain may warn us of the approach of evil. It is the alarm-bell which nature rings. Pain may be used in the strong hand of God as a punishment of the sin we have committed. But never forget that far above such ministries, pain, when it is willingly accepted, is one of the choicest instruments of purifying that is wielded by the love of heaven. Fight against it and it shatters you. All the tools of God have double edges. Rebel against it as a thing of cruelty, and all the light of life, may be destroyed. But take it up, absorb it, in the life, weave it into the fabric of the being, and God shall bring the blossom from the thorn.

This thought, as it seems to me, may throw some light on the sufferings of the innocent.

Why Does The Innocent Suffer?

One of the hardest questions in the world is why the innocent should have to suffer so. There is no perfect answer to that question, nor ever shall be on this side of the grave. But is there not at least a partial answer in what I have been trying to say? If pain were a curse, and nothing but a curse, well might we doubt the justice on the throne; but, if pain be a ladder to a better life, then light falls on the sufferings of the innocent. It is not the anger of heaven that is smiting them. It may be the love of heaven that is blessing them. There are always tears and blood upon the steps that lead men heavenward to where the angels are. Mark you, not by the fraction of a pennyweight does that lighten the guilt of him who causes suffering. It only shows us how the love of God can take the curse and turn it to a blessing.

The Gospel and Pain

So I am led lastly to consider this, What has the Gospel done to help us to bear pain? I shall touch on three things which it has done.

The Gospel has quieted those questionings which are often sorer than the pain itself. It has helped us to believe that God is love, in the teeth of all the suffering in the world. Have you ever noticed about Jesus Christ that He was never perplexed by the great fact of pain? Death troubled Him, for He groaned in spirit and was troubled when He stood before the grave of Lazarus. But, though the fact of death troubled His soul, there is no trace that the dark fact of pain did so-and yet was there ever one on earth so sensitive to pain as Jesus Christ? Here was a man who saw pain at its bitterest, yet not for an instant did He doubt His Father. Here was One who had to suffer terribly, and yet, through all His sufferings, God loved Him-it is these facts which, for the believing soul, silence the obstinate questionings forever. We may not see why we should have to suffer. We may not see why our loved ones have to suffer. Now we know in part and see in part; we are but children crying in the night. But we see Jesus, and that sufficeth us. We see how He trusted. We know how He was loved. And knowing that, we may doubt many things, but we never can doubt the love of God again, nor Christ's promise never to leave us.

The Gospel has helped us here by giving us the hope of immortality. It has set our pain in quite a new environment, that of an eternal hope. I wonder if you have ever thought of the place and power of hope in human suffering? Hope is mighty in all we have to do; but it is mighty also in all we have to bear. When once you get the glow of a great hope right in the heart of what you have to suffer, I tell you that that

suffering is transfigured. Two people may have to endure an equal agony--taken abstractly, the pains are much alike,--but the one sufferer may be a hopeless man, and the other a woman with the hope of motherhood; and who shall tell the difference there is in the bearing of everything that must be borne, through the presence or the absence of such hope? It is just there that Jesus Christ steps in. He has brought immortality to light. Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us an exceeding weight of glory. Out of Christ, we thought it was unending. We thought we never should have strength to bear it. But now, against the background of the glory, our light affliction is but for a moment.

Christ has helped us to bear suffering by the medical science and skill he has inspired. And I close with that, just mentioning it because I am speaking on Hospital Sunday. It has been pointed out again and again that in the pagan world there were no hospitals. There were many noble women in that world, but not one of them ever dreamed of being a nurse. As a simple matter of historical fact, our hospitals are in the world today not because men are tenderer of heart, but because Jesus lived and Jesus died. Without Christ, we had had no Florence Nightingale--think what that would mean for British soldiers! Without Christ, we would never have had Lord Lister--think what that would have meant for countless sufferers! Without Christ, there had not been lying yonder, in the hospital which is so near me as I speak, poor men and women who are being tended by the finest skill that riches could command. For this thing will I be enquired of, saith the Lord. Yes, take a calm look at tonight. Tell me if you have ever realized what Jesus Christ has done for the community. If you have, go out and reverence Him. Go out into the night and call Him wonderful. Go out into the night and say, "God helping me, I shall follow that leader to the end.

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