Pain Can Warn Us of Danger

Our Daily Bread University
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How could a good God allow pain and suffering? Dr. Paul Brand came face to face with that question on the streets of India.

Dr. Paul Brand: And I asked people, "What are those people?" "Oh, they've got leprosy." Leprosy, I'd never thought about leprosy. "But why have they got all those awful deformities? "Oh, it's…that's what leprosy does."

In the years that followed, Dr. Brand was troubled not only by the disease he worked with, but by a God who would allow it to happen.

"Faith on Trial, Ten Reasons to Believe in a God Who Allows Suffering, Part 2," on this Day of Discovery.

SUMMARY

In part 1 of "Ten Reasons to Believe in a God Who Allows Suffering," we explored these four reasons.

The First Reason to Believe in a God Who Allows Suffering: Suffering Comes with the Freedom to Choose

R. Douglas Geivett: You cannot do good without freedom. On the other hand, you can do evil if you are free.

A Second Reason to Believe in a God Who Allows Suffering: Suffering Reveals What Is in Our Hearts

Gerry E. Breshears: I think of people like hot chocolate with whipped cream on it. When you look at the cup and it's covered up with whipped cream, you don't know what's in that cup until somebody bumps the cup and you see what slops out. In a similar kind of way, we can't tell what's in people's hearts until their cup is bumped.

A Third Reason to Believe in a God Who Allows Suffering: Suffering Takes Us to the Edge of Eternity

Kerby Anderson: I think we have to recognize that if there is no life after death, then some people were really dealt a bad set of cards.

A Fourth Reason to Believe in a God Who Allows Suffering: God Can Turn Suffering Around for Our Good

Ravi Zacharias: Time and time again, history is replete with examples of what God has done in the midst of a people's pain.

Now through his experience as a medical doctor confronted daily with the reality of human suffering, Dr. Paul Brand examines three more reasons to believe in a God who allows pain and suffering.

Reason 5: Pain Can Warn Us of Danger

Dr. Paul Brand: You know everybody instinctively thinks of pain as a problem. It's a bad pain. It's a kind of given. And therefore we must get rid of it.

Dr. Brand is known internationally for his pioneering medical research into the disease of leprosy and his brilliant work as an orthopedic surgeon. Now in his eighties, he has spent the majority of his life responding to the needs of people in pain.

Dr. Paul Brand: It was a special interest of mine when I was a medical student in World War II, because we were having to treat people crushed under fallen houses from the bombing and people suffering terrible pain. And really a lot of my effort was to relieve pain. And I felt myself as being against pain.

Dr. Brand's love and concern for people brought him to India in the early 1950s. For nearly two decades, he served the people of India. At that time India's population was growing toward the half billion mark, and yet it was a land with very few doctors.

Dr. Paul Brand: I think it's fair to say that I went to India with the feeling that there was a lot of suffering there. And I was going to India in the name of Jesus Christ to help relieve human suffering, where there was no doctors and very little pain medication.

But when I went there, one of the early things that I experienced was to see beggars along the sides of the streets and that outside the temples, people with no fingers on their hands, blind, with feet that were either grossly ulcerated and covered with flies or amputated. And I asked people, "What are those people?" "Oh, they've got leprosy." Leprosy, I'd never thought about leprosy.

"But why have they got all those awful deformities?" "Oh, it's… that's what leprosy does." And somehow having gone to India to teach medicine and surgery at the Christian Medical College, I suddenly had the feeling this is why I have come here. God has directed me to help these people. They must be in terrible pain.

And then I saw some of these people with awful ulcerations and infections in their feet. I'd see them get up and yawn and stretch and walk without limping on these same feet. And it made me cringe. Anyway, to cut a long story short, that started me on a totally fresh study, the study of leprosy. And I learned in the end that the reason and almost the only reason that these awful deformities and blindness occurred in leprosy patients is that they can't feel pain. The germs of leprosy don't destroy the feet and they don't destroy the fingers, and they don't, well, they do sometimes make people blind, but the main thing they do is simply to destroy the pain nerves. And these people lose the feeling of pain. And once they have lost the feeling of pain, they do all the rest of it to themselves.

People often wonder when I lecture about leprosy how it's possible that their whole finger can be missing simply because of lack of pain. And this puzzled us for a long time. And then we had, we sometimes put spies in patients' rooms when they went to bed. Because sometimes the person would go to bed with an entire finger, and wake up with part of the finger missing. And we just couldn't understand how lack of pain could make that difference.

But what we found was that somehow rats got to know which patients could feel pain and couldn't feel pain. And in the villages of India there are plenty of rats that come into the houses. And what they would do, and still do, is to go up to a patient and nuzzle an exposed hand. Anybody who can feel will kind of immediately move and the rat will run away.

But if the hand doesn't move, then they'll take a bite. And if it still doesn't move, then they have a meal. And by morning the tip of their finger will have gone. And anyhow we had to…this is the

problem people face. Sometimes even the things that they don't initiate, it happens to them.

Eventually we had to arrange to have a cat. We had a breeding program for cats, and we sent a cat with every patient when they went home. And the cat would stay, sleep beside the patient, and serve as their pain protection for the night.

One thing has interested me about pain. And that is, granted, that it's important and that we must have it to warn us that fire is hot and the things that happen that need to be treated. But it seems to me that God, if He was intelligent enough, could have arranged a system that would inform me, that would say, Paul, don't get too close to that fire, you know?

I can feel touch with my fingers. I can hear things that warn me of every approaching danger. Why shouldn't I just have that kind of information to say that you shouldn't hold something so hot, or you step on something sharp? But, you know, it's such a big problem that when I came to America and worked at the leprosy hospital in the Public Health Service, I was able to spend a lot of money studying this. And I tried to play God. I said to myself, *How would I set about…these poor people…can't feel pain…how can I make them feel pain?*

And I hired three first-class engineers, a professor of mechanical engineering, a professor of electrical engineering, and I said, "Create a signal that the patient can hear through a hearing aid, and it'll come from his fingers and from his feet, that will tell him when he is doing something he oughtn't to do, because it's dangerous. For example, a pressure transducer will tell him when he's squeezing a handle too hard. And a temperature sensor that'll tell him when something's too hot. And they did this. You know, we spent, I shame to say, we spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on these little transducers, and they did a beautiful job. It cost $450, each transducer, and we put them, two or three on the fingertips, and several on the feet, and so forth.

And they would have little wires running up to the ear, and they'd give a beep, a musical beep. And if it was a very loud beep, it meant it was very dangerous. If it was a low beep, it'd be less dangerous. And different tunes according to which hand and which finger was being pressed on. And this was a triumphant of mechanical engineering. And the patients who we fitted these things on were really quite excited, and they liked it and they would hold things,

and they'd go close to the fire and feel the thing, and hear the signals.

But, you know, the excitement and the newness wore off, and then I saw them switching off their machine when they wanted to do something dangerous. If they wanted to run fast, if they wanted to play a game, basketball, they'd quietly switch off their signals and do dangerous things and get…sometimes get injuries. And then I knew it has to hurt, and there mustn't be a switch.

And all these understandings of the mechanisms of the body—we doctors have a tremendous privilege in looking behind the mind of God and thinking of the wonder of the superintelligence that thought ahead and planned the human body to be self-protected and to be able to heal.

We hate suffering, especially in those we love. Yet without pain, a person with leprosy doesn't feel the bite of a rat. The bite of sin is one reason the book of Genesis says God multiplied pain after our first parents' disobedience. It was God's loving and protective purpose that caused Him to say to the woman,

" 'I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception;

In pain you shall bring forth children.…'

Then to Adam He said…

'Cursed is the ground for your sake;

In toil you shall eat of it

All the days of your life.

Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you,

And you shall eat the herb of the field.

In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread

Till you return to the ground,

For out of it you were taken;

For dust you are,

And to dust you shall return' "

[Genesis 3:16–19 NKJV]

Harsh words. But the alternative would be worse. Imagine a world infected with a leprosy of the soul, a world numbed to the dangers of sin, but without the pain that would return us to the One who made us for Himself.