

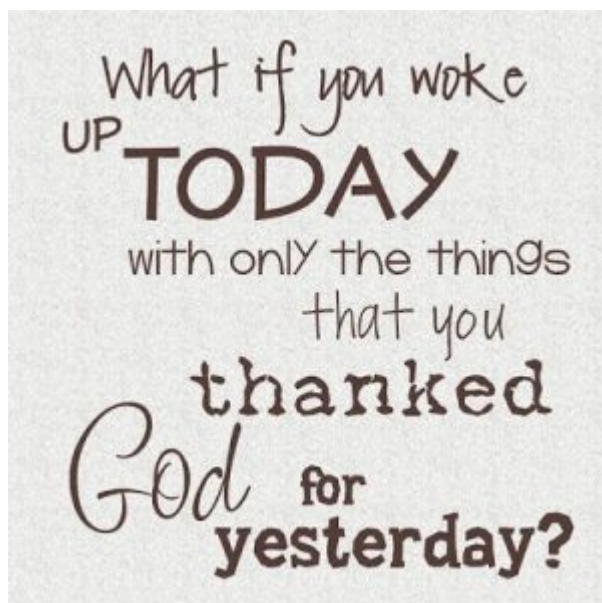
Five Reasons I'm Thankful for Suffering

"God is most glorified in us, when we most emphatically recognize how desperate our need for Him is."

[Taken from my personal journal, June 25, 2011]

If you are close to me you probably know how much contempt I have for internet memes that try to make a serious point. They are great for humor but terrible for profundity and debating. It's a symptom of a lazy intellectual culture that we think some subjects can be commented on so simplistically.

Yet every now and then I see one that nails it in just a few words. A couple of years ago I saw this one:



I confess, THAT convicted me.

At that point, many days had passed in my life where I may have prayed, but I didn't thank God for one single thing. So I made it a point to try to thank God for something every day. Currently, every single day first thing in the morning, I thank God for the person and work of Jesus Christ and for my wife.

But I've noticed that when I thank God for other things, I default to things that are things that I like. Things that make my life easier. Things that make me happy. It's completely counter-intuitive, I've discovered, to thank God for pain.

Yet, 1 Thessalonians 5:18 says to "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will." I'm sure that means what it says. Whatever I experience, God works through it for good. I believe Genesis 50:20 teaches that through narrative and Romans 8:28 teaches that through doctrine. And I can be thankful for this.

So as I look back over my "Journal of Pain" (as I call it) that I kept from 1998 until I got married last year, I can give several reasons why I am not thankful in spite of suffering, but because of it.

1. Pain destroys spiritual complacency.

I've noticed that whenever I'm hurting I tend to read my Bible with more urgency. Psalm 119:71 says, "It is good for me to be afflicted, that I may learn your decrees." And when I'm suffering, I tend to pray with more passion. When Psalm 42 says, "As the deer pants for the water, so my soul longs after you" I am certain the writer was in pain, based on the verses that come after it. I have little doubt that while God doesn't cause all pain, he does allow it and whether he causes it or not His ultimate goal is His glory. The more intensely I'm seeking Him, the more glorified He is. And I've learned that

when things are going well I am extremely tempted have more ritualistic Bible reading times and superficial prayers.

2. Pain transforms my faith and my character.

One of the most important statements I wrote in my journal was: "Real change—genuine character transformation—is subtle, takes time and is virtually unnoticeable while it is happening. In going back over the last 10 years of journal entries tonight, I cannot deny that pain has changed me. I'm not the same person I was before I went through these intense times of loneliness and depression. I understand the Bible better, I know God better and I trust God more." Pain may be God's most common method for transforming people into what he wants them to be. 1 Peter 4:1-2 says, "Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin. As a result, they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God."

3. Pain wages war on my self-sufficiency and pride.

Paul said in 2 Corinthians 1 that he despaired of life for one major reason: so that he would not rely on himself but on God. I very much get this. I want to be independent. I want to be strong. I want people see me as a spiritual giant. And then I experience something so painful I have no choice but to cry out in weakness and despair, because I am helpless to a great level. Of course there are times for action and responsibility. But God will try to make sure that these things do not feed the ego. Desperation obliterates the ego. Paul even said once that God gave him a thorn in the flesh, not because he was proud, but to keep him from becoming proud. Pain keeps us humble because it forces us to look outside ourselves.

4. Pain teaches me how God feels.

In studying the Bible when I am in pain, I often find myself reading in the Old Testament Prophets and I have noticed that they often tell us a lot about how God feels. And God does indeed suffer when people rebel against him (Isaiah 63:9). And I cannot help but wonder if God allows me to go through some things to know what he experiences. One of the foundational goals of the Christian life, in Paul's words, is "to know Him". And not just in the power of his resurrections but also in the "fellowship of his sufferings". To know God is to know Christ. And vice-versa.

5. Pain takes the focus off of inconsequential things and puts it on the eternal.

In 2 Corinthians 4, Paul said his light and momentary afflictions (and considering his list of persecutions in 2 Corinthians 11:16-33, it is amazing he would call them that) produced in him "an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison". And followed that by saying "So we fix our eyes, not on what is seen, but what is unseen. Because what is seen is temporary and what is unseen is eternal." There is no doubt that without suffering I am more inclined to be materialistic and focus on my personal kingdom building. When I suffer, I don't long for things that will corrode or end up in a garage sale one day, things that are good but can be distractions.

When I suffer, I long for Christ, who can make all things new and right all of the wrongs of this messed up earth. That is the perspective God wants. In spite of all of his losses, and all of his pain, God still worked through Job enough to say that he knew his Redeemer lived and that one day he would see him with his own eyes.

In Job 37, Elihu says that “God thunders with his voice, doing great things we cannot understand.” I want to be thankful for that. Nearly half the Psalms in the Bible feature the word “Thanks”. Over 60 of them say “Give thanks”. And so as we set aside a day and a season for thanksgiving, I encourage us to put pain at the top of our list. It purifies us in ways few other things can. If we saw what God sees and how he is using things to transform us, we’d be thankful several times a day. But we don’t have sight; we have faith. May God open our spiritual eyes to what is unseen, but worth being thankful for.