

**SCRIPTURE TEXT:** Romans 8:18-25

**SERMON SERIES:** Where Is God When It Hurts?

**SERMON TITLE:** Why Pain?

*Where Is God When It Hurts?*<sup>1</sup> is the title of a book by Philip Yancey, but it's also a question that most of us have wrestled with at one time or another in our lives. I know that I have. The question confronted me when our first-born son spent his first two weeks of life in an intensive care nursery suffering from an infection that ultimately caused him to lose a kidney. I struggled with the question again when I conducted my first funeral service for an infant who had died just a few days after birth. I've even entered into the question through the pain of others like the mother in Corpus Christi who suffered several miscarriages and then gave birth to a child with multiple birth defects. The baby lived only a short time, but that family lived with the pain of those losses for a long time.

So *Where is God when it hurts?* This is the question we'll be pursuing over these next several weeks. We begin today with a look at the issue of pain. We're asking the question:

**Why is there such a thing as pain?**

In Romans 8, Paul acknowledges the obvious: suffering is a part of God's creation. Paul says that God has subjected creation to futility and decay which inevitably produces suffering. Paul says that the creation itself is groaning in pain as if giving birth. Paul even says that those of us who have received the first fruits of the Spirit are groaning along with the creation.

And that's understandable. After all, we human beings are a part of this creation. God has designed us with the capacity to experience pain and we are vulnerable to the forces at work within the creation that cause us suffering.

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<sup>1</sup> Philip, Yancey. Where Is God When It Hurts? A Comforting, Healing Guide for Coping with Hard Times. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, MI, 1990.

Now it's on this last point that many of us have a problem. We want to know: Why are we so vulnerable to pain and suffering? Couldn't God have designed the creation to produce a little less pain and suffering? Couldn't God have limited the ability of cancer cells to multiply uncontrollably? Couldn't God have made the plates that form the crust of the earth to be just a little more stable to avoid earthquakes and tsunamis that produce so much pain and suffering?

On top of this, the scriptures envision a future in which death and mourning and crying and pain will be more because the first things will have passed away? The question is: Why the delay? Why doesn't God simply do now what God intends to do in the future and save us all from pain and suffering?

Well frankly, I don't know the answers to these questions and I've struggled with them for a long time—perhaps you have too. The Bible even struggles with these issues and frankly, goes back and forth on the question of why--more about that next week. What the Bible does do is affirm the obvious: In this creation we're subject to pain. It's the way God has made us.

Come to think of it, capacity to experience pain may actually be a good thing. Philip Yancey puts it this way: *Pain is not God's great goof. The sensation of pain is a gift—the gift that nobody wants.*<sup>2</sup>

Why is pain a gift? Well, it could be that if we didn't feel pain, we'd be in trouble. Pain serves as kind of a warning bell that let's us know when something is wrong. Yancey writes: *When I break an arm and swallow bottles of aspirin to dull the ache, gratitude for pain is not the first thought that comes to mind. Yet at that very moment, pain is alerting my body to the danger, mobilizing anti-infection defenses around the wound, and forcing me to refrain from*

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 21.

*activities that might further compound the injury. Pain demands attention that is crucial to my recovery.*<sup>3</sup>

It's when we are unable to feel pain that we are at great risk. Lepers, for example, are unable to experience physical pain, that's why we see lepers covered with sores and deformities. These injuries are not the direct result of the disease; they are a consequence of the disease's ability to numb the extremities so that pain is no longer felt. For example, a man suffering from leprosy is sweeping the floor with a broom. He doesn't realize that the blood trickling down his hand was the result of a nail that was sticking out of the broom handle and cutting his flesh. Because of his leprosy, he feels no pain and therefore the wound only gets worse.<sup>4</sup>

Disastrous consequences can also result when we fail to acknowledge emotional or spiritual pain—pain that results from our own self-centeredness or self-destructiveness—pain that results from our being estranged from God and other human beings. When we suppress this kind of pain—or numb ourselves to the pain without dealing with it—we become the emotional and spiritual equivalents of lepers.

For example, several years ago I watched TV program called *28 Days of Recovery*. It focused on a group of people who had abused drugs and alcohol for years but who had finally gotten themselves into rehab. One of the women made a frank admission. She said two things: First, that she had gotten into drugs in order to not feel the pain that was inside of her; and second, after having been on drugs for years, she could feel absolutely nothing. This inability to feel was a significant problem that this woman had to overcome in rehab because the truth is,

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 24-25.

we're all made to feel and when we refuse to feel the pain that is ours, we deny our humanity and serious problems arise that can destroy us.<sup>5</sup>

But when we embrace the pain—whatever kind of pain it is—and seek God within the pain—then there's hope for a way through the pain and into newness of life. Perhaps that's why Paul invites us to see the suffering inherent in creation as analogous to the pain of childbirth.

And every now and then we hear a story about how pain can become the catalyst for transformation and new life. Some of you may have heard of Tim Hansel. Perhaps you've read some of his books. Tim survived a near-fatal fall in the Sierra Mountains more than 30 years ago. Since then he has lived with intense chronic pain. In a journal entry dated fall, 1974, Tim wrote: *I feel almost dismembered this morning by outrageous pain. It is almost comical to have reached such a ludicrous level of disorder. Me, with my desire to be agile and free, barely able to get up and out of a chair this morning. Teach me to live in new ways, O Lord. Teach me and show me your ways in the midst of this.*

*In times like these of such intense pain, confusion and doubt, one must simply decide and do, decide and do—and laugh a bit amidst the consequences.*

Now as a Christian, Tim Hansel has prayed *hundreds, if not thousands of times* for healing, and yet physical healing has not come. He still suffers. But through his pain, new life has come. He's come to the conclusion that while *pain is unavoidable, misery is optional*. He even says that he has been *healed from the need to be healed*. He says that he's found peace inside the pain.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Unavailable.

<sup>6</sup> Hansel, Tim. You gotta keep dancin' in the midst of life's hurts, you can choose joy! Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Pub., 1998.

So why pain? How do you see it? Is our capacity to experience pain a good thing given the nature of this creation? How can our pain become like the pain of childbirth—an experience that gives rise to something new and transformed? May God help us as we wrestle with the questions amidst the reality of our own pain.