

TEXARKANA REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

PAIN IS NECESSARY FOR SALVATION

DAVE WAGNER

Last time I told you Pain in the Christian life is Predestined; God planned it, God administers it, God is in control of it; and for the elect, God is using Pain for their good. I can imagine someone saying, "Okay, Pain is Predestined. But why? Why would God decide to administer pain to us? Why not choose a course of history in which God's people, or all people, experience no pain? Wouldn't that be a better choice?"

So today's sermon aims to answer that question in part. This won't be an exhaustive answer, but it is a significant part of the answer. My point today is that God Predestined Pain because Pain is Necessary to the saving of a sinner. So our doctrine today is that Pain is Necessary for the saving of a sinner.

Now before we go further let's have some definitions. By "pain" I'm referring to the suffering people experience, physical, emotional or spiritual, which exceeds the limit of tolerability (so, for example, I'm not really thinking of someone who experiences a brief, insignificant pain in stubbing his toe or being stuck in traffic): serious injury and illness, significant depression and anxiety, bereavement and grief, fear of a dangerous and uncertain future, etc.

By "necessary" I mean that, given the present situation of our world in which man is fallen and God has chosen to redeem a portion of the race, it is required that sinful humans in process of redemption experience pain. In order for God to arrive at the goal he intends there is no other way except one which involves significant pain for his people.

I also need to mention here that I'm speaking of general necessity and not absolute necessity. In other words, I believe it to be the normal condition for saved sinners to need God to apply pain to them in order to keep them on the straight and

narrow. But this does not mean everyone experiences the same amount of pain, nor am I sure there aren't people who are somewhat exceptional in this regard. It is possible that God may graciously decide to give so much power to one of his children that they will not need the same amount of spankings as the rest of us. Strictly speaking, it would be possible for God to give so much power to a Christian that they would need no spankings at all. Perhaps God has done things like this before; I don't know. But I just mean to qualify here by saying that this necessity is general, not absolute. God could save sinners without pain if he chose, but we presume it would require a level of grace for that sinner which is not the common experience of Christians. In general, Christian sinfulness requires discipline from God in the form of pain to keep them walking rightly.

By "save" I refer to not only the initial aspect of salvation in which people are justified before God at the moment of regeneration and faith, but rather to the total process of redeeming sinful people and changing them from active sinners to active saints. This is an important distinction to get hold of for our lesson since it is not true to say pain is necessary to justify sinners; faith alone is necessary for that. Of course it is an interesting consideration in this respect that, actually, in another sense pain is necessary even for the justification of the sinner, namely, the Pain of Jesus Christ in his atoning death. The idea that without shedding of blood there is no remission of sins may have even deeper implications than we are used to seeing in it. But for our purpose today, I am saying that Pain is Necessary in order to continue in the process of total redemption which God is accomplishing in his people, not having respect only to the initial aspect of redemption which we know as justification.

And we need to add another qualification before proceeding. When we say pain is necessary for saving sinners we do not mean Christians ought to seek pain or circumstances in which pain and affliction are likely to occur. For example, this is not an encouragement to seek pain and affliction in poverty. When we come to our text in Proverbs we will see that the request of the wise man, in prayer, is not that

God would make him poor but that God would keep him from both poverty and riches, in light of the unique temptations which accompany both. What the wise man asks for is not pain, but balance. Not too much, and not too little. Our attitude should be the same. We should not desire pain; nor should we desire inordinate pleasure, ease, comfort and wealth, and such desire is explicitly attacked by Paul in 1Timothy 6. We should desire to have enough so as to avoid need, and we should not desire to have too much so as to avoid apostasy which often follows from prosperity.

Now in order to prove my point from Scripture, I want to show you passages which reveal the danger of prosperity; they make an explicit connection between prosperity and apostasy (falling away); the connection is that prosperity leads to apostasy. My assumption here is that since this is true, Christians should see the value of the opposite of prosperity, pain and affliction, for keeping them near to God. Let's start by looking at Deuteronomy 31 and 32:

Deuteronomy 31:20 "For when I bring them into the land flowing with milk and honey, which I swore to their fathers, and they have eaten and are satisfied and become prosperous, then they will turn to other gods and serve them, and spurn Me and break My covenant.

Deuteronomy 32:13-15 "He made him ride on the high places of the earth, And he ate the produce of the field; And He made him suck honey from the rock, And ^coil from the flinty rock, Curds of cows, and milk of the flock, With fat of lambs, And rams, the breed of Bashan, and goats, With the finest of the wheat-- And of the blood of grapes you drank wine. "But Jeshurun grew fat and kicked-- You are grown fat, thick, and sleek-- Then he forsook God who made him, And scorned the Rock of his salvation.

In the first text above God is predicting that once Israel enters the land and becomes prosperous they will abandon God for other gods. The second text says the same thing more poetically, offering the famous statement about "Jeshurun growing fat and kicking." "Jeshurun" is a nickname for Israel; "kicking" pictures Israel as an animal that God is working with, and this animal is stubborn and rebellious, leveling a kick at its owner and master. The "growing fat" speaks of Israel coming into material prosperity, and it is plain from both texts there is an important connection between growing fat/prosperous and kicking against God. The prosperity, in some sense, causes or facilitates religious rebellion. I will suggest the reason for this connection once we are finished looking at proofs for the doctrine. Suffice it to say that, here, it is plain that prosperity led to Israel's demise and so they would have been better off having more affliction. To support this point, realize the period in question is that covered by the Book of Judges; in that story, Israel's defection from God always occurs once the nation has enjoyed freedom and prosperity for a time, and their repentance and return to the Lord always occurs once they have been afflicted and oppressed for a time. To draw the moral: Affliction was necessary to bring Israel to God and keep her there. Prosperity, not pain, was Israel's great danger. Next we look at a common Biblical idea from Proverbs and Matthew:

Proverbs 30:7-9 Two things I asked of You, Do not refuse me before I die: Keep deception and lies far from me, Give me neither poverty nor riches; Feed me with the food that is my portion, That I not be full and deny You and say, "Who is the LORD?" Or that I not be in want and steal, And profane the name of my God.

Matthew 19:23-24 And Jesus said to His disciples, "Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. "Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

In the Proverbs text, the wise man asks God to keep him from both poverty and riches; neither is really ideal, though God can be faithfully served in both conditions. But for our purpose today, notice the result which follows from being rich according to the wise man: He speaks of being full and denying God. As with the Deuteronomy passages, the connection is drawn between prosperity and apostasy. While our Proverbs text will not allow a simple glorification of poverty (since it, too, comes with a unique danger), we are required once again to notice the danger of prosperity.

In the Matthew text we do not get such a balanced qualification on the issue of the dangers of prosperity. Jesus is far less nuanced in his statements on the issue, such as here where he flatly speaks of the extreme difficulty of the rich entering the kingdom. The abundance of prosperity which the rich experience makes it harder for them to enter than others. It would be better for them if they had less wealth and more affliction, as far as salvation is concerned. Let's have one more text which shows the danger of prosperity:

Psalm 73:1-18 A Psalm of Asaph. Surely God is good to Israel, To those who are pure in heart! But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling, My steps had almost slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant As I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For there are no pains in their death, And their body is fat. They are not in trouble as other men, Nor are they plagued like mankind. Therefore pride is their necklace; The garment of violence covers them. Their eye bulges from fatness; The imaginations of their heart run riot. They mock and wickedly speak of oppression; They speak from on high. They have set their mouth against the heavens, And their tongue parades through the earth. Therefore his people return to this place, And waters of abundance are drunk by them. They say, "How does God know? And is there knowledge with the Most High?" Behold, these are the wicked; And always at ease, they have increased in

wealth. Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure And washed my hands in innocence; For I have been stricken all day long And chastened every morning. If I had said, "I will speak thus," Behold, I would have betrayed the generation of Your children. When I pondered to understand this, It was troublesome in my sight Until I came into the sanctuary of God; Then I perceived their end. Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction.

Asaph describes how his trust in God almost slipped when he saw how the wicked prospered, and compared this with his own afflictions despite his faithfulness to God. The key here comes in v17-18, where Asaph enters God's sanctuary and receives insight which changes his whole attitude. He says in v18 that God sets the wicked in slippery places. If we ask what this means, we are wise to return to the previous part of the Psalm to see what God is doing to the wicked from v1 to v12; the answer is that God is blessing them greatly with prosperity. I suggest that Asaph is saying that God's blessing of prosperity on the wicked is one and the same with his setting them in slippery places. Now that we have seen the previous texts above from Deuteronomy, Proverbs and Matthew, we are prepared to explain the identification of prosperity with a dangerous, slippery place which results in ruin for the man in question. Prosperity is dangerous in itself; but give it to a man who is a determined sinner and the danger is magnified times ten. The wicked is certain to use the prosperity and power God has given him to accomplish greater self-indulgence and greater disregard of God than would the righteous. Prosperity gives a man power to sin against God as he could not have before. This helps clarify a question which may be in some minds at this point: Am I saying prosperity makes men evil? Not at all; men are already evil, being children of Adam. But prosperity functions to provide greater scope for their evil to manifest itself; it super-charges their evil to bring it to heights and depths which it could not otherwise have reached. Prosperity gives evil room to stretch and run swiftly, to grow and increase and to be more itself than balance or affliction would have allowed. And now we

have our answer to the question I posed in the introduction: Why is it we need pain in order to progress through salvation? Because we are evil, and affliction functions as a restraint, a corrective, a discipline upon our evil. So Asaph's attitude changes once he realizes that God's blessing of the wicked is one and the same with God placing the wicked on an iced-over, slippery, narrow, mountain pass; the wicked takes three steps and then slides over the edge and is broken on the jagged rocks below. With this realization, Asaph is free to see the goodness and the necessity of God striking and chastening him in v14.

CONCLUSION AND APPLICATION

If pain is necessary for the saving of the sinner, we should not be surprised when we encounter pain in our lives. Pain doesn't mean something has gone wrong; it means everything is going according to plan. On the contrary, the Christian should think it strange when they go for long periods without any significant pain; we should think it strange and we should give thanks to God. In some cases a prolonged lack of pain and trouble should concern the Christian, since Hebrews 12 tells us Christian suffering is God disciplining us as his own children, and those who are without discipline are illegitimate children and do not belong to God at all.

Following from the last idea, when Christians suffer pain they should not assume God is angry with them or has abandoned them. These things are possible; God does give us pain at times as a direct result of our sin, and God will take his presence away from us for a time as discipline for our sin. If in doubt, the Christian must seek God in prayer and Scripture and examine himself and repent of sin in order to determine whether he has sin which needs to be addressed. However, Christians should not assume sin as the cause of their pain; it is entirely possible that the Christian is experiencing the normal pain which God gives his children to teach them faith, endurance, obedience, and to keep them humble and dependent on God, irrespective of their sin.

We can also note that, per Scripture and against the world's best wisdom, material prosperity isn't all it's cracked up to be. Wealth is from the Lord and it can be a great blessing to God's people; a number of God's children and servants in Scripture and church history were wealthy, and they used their wealth to the glory of God. Per Proverbs, the man who works hard and is wise is likely to end up with some amount of wealth, and maybe a lot. Being wealthy isn't a sin and wealth isn't evil. We are evil. And consequently, desiring to be wealthy is sinful greed. And being wealthy places one in a dangerous position; to be fair, being poor also comes with a unique danger. But the fact remains that Scripture has far more to say about the danger of wealth than of poverty; indeed, the poor are blessed, and for the most part, God has chosen the poor, not the rich, for salvation. Of course riches are desirable, not for their own sake, but because they give one more power to avoid pain and suffering. Riches keep pain at bay and give access to pleasure and comfort. But the Christian should be wiser than to seek such things, knowing that prosperity is generally a danger and pain is a necessity for anyone who wishes to deliver his soul from death. All this is to say we should not desire or seek wealth and prosperity, nor should we be overly fearful of the pain and suffering which comes to those who are not materially prosperous. We must pursue God's righteousness and kingdom, not a life of pain-free prosperity.

The world we live in is like a habit-forming drug. Generally, the longer people live, and the more enjoyable their life is, the more attached they become to life. God gives pain in order to shock us awake, so we can remember and know that we must not get too attached to this world since we cannot keep it forever. We must lose it in death. Pain breaks our addiction to the world. Every pain God sends us is a forerunner, or a foretaste of our death, which, in a sense, will be the greatest pain of all. Every pain we suffer has this in common, that it forces us into a situation where we do not get what we wish; every pain tears our own will out of our hands and leaves us, for a time, in a position contrary to our will. Various pains do this in a small way. Death will do this in the ultimate way. Pain aids us in the invaluable

practice of saying, and meaning, "Not my will, but thine be done," since we would never choose pain for ourselves, but as every pain comes from God and is his will, we must either submit to God's painful will for us, or else refuse to submit and rage against God. We must view pain very differently from the world. Non-Christians see pain as the greatest evil, and pleasure as the greatest good; Christians know better. We must see pain as an unpleasant but necessary medicine which keeps us from growing too attached to a doomed world.