

CHRONIC PAIN AND ILLNESS

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Pain *and* Providence

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Living *with* Pain

It's not going to go away. The realization may have been years in the making, or it may have come in one swift, devastating stroke. But at last you know that pain—your pain, whatever it may be—is here to stay. Perhaps it is an illness, or a rebellious child, a chronic muscle problem, the death of a loved one, or a severe disability in the family. Whatever form it takes, it's the common experience of all people. Human pain wears a thousand guises.

Although I have lived as a quadriplegic for more than 45 years and have survived stage 3 cancer, both conditions pale when it comes to living with chronic pain. Ten years ago, I began experiencing a knifing pain in my left hip and back. Others may say I'm a stalwart and seasoned Christian, but I'll confess: When chronic pain moves in to stay, it can erode your joy like acid, warp your personality, and rob you of the ability to tackle the smallest of tasks. When you are in pain:

- ▣ You dial down your days into hourly increments: *If only I can make it to the next hour, and then, bedtime.*
- ▣ Your bed is no longer the place of comfort and rest it once was: *I can't get to sleep again tonight. When will morning ever come?*
- ▣ Pain and chronic illness distract you from important relationships: *I don't even know what a normal life is anymore, and my battle with pain seems to be pushing people away!*
- ▣ Pain and illness can end up defining who you are: *I feel like the real "me" has been hijacked! How can I live this way?*

Where is God when It Hurts?

Pain and chronic illness can make you question God and his power. Consider these typical questions:

- ▣ Does God create situations to intentionally make you as unhappy as you can possibly be?
- ▣ Or does he wish for you a pain-free, healthier life, but is powerless to do anything about it?
- ▣ Are God and the devil in an arm-wrestling match over your body? If so, who is in control—God or the devil?
- ▣ And if your pain *does* fall under the control of God, why doesn't he stop it, or at least alleviate it?

Over the next pages, let's take a close and honest look at what God's Word has to say about pain and the providence of God.

Providence:

Because we know God holds all the keys of the universe, we also know he sees and governs everything that happens on earth.

Facts *about* Pain

Acute pain is your body's way of waving a red flag for immediate attention, often because of an injury. Chronic pain, on the other hand, lasts for weeks, months, or years. It affects about 38% of Americans—more than cancer, diabetes, and heart disease combined.

- ▣ **Pain Is Both Physical and Emotional:** Pain, especially chronic pain, affects more than your body. It's psychologically stressful and can lead to emotions like anger and frustration. Pain and stress can be a vicious circle, increasing stress levels, which in turn can make pain worse. Seventy-seven percent of people with chronic pain report depression, and seventy percent report trouble concentrating.
- ▣ **Women Feel More Pain than Men:** Women experience more pain than men over their lifetimes. Studies also show that women may experience pain differently—often more intensely—than men do.
- ▣ **The Brain Doesn't Feel Pain:** When you stub your toe or touch something hot, your body releases chemicals that send pain signals up through the spinal cord to receptors in the brain. The brain then sends the pain message back down to the part of the body that hurts. But although it's the interpreter of pain, the brain itself does not have pain-sensitive nerves.
- ▣ **Back Pain Is the Most Common Pain Condition:** In a survey done by the National Institutes of Health, 27 percent of Americans said low back pain was their most common type of pain, followed by headaches or migraines (15 percent). More than 26 million Americans aged 20 to 64 suffer from back pain, and each year we spend at least \$50 billion on back pain relief.¹



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You are not alone! Do not allow pain to isolate you. Do not believe that “no one understands.” Remember, many others are dealing with pain and/or chronic medical conditions like yours.

1. 2012 Everyday Health, Inc. www.everydayhealth.com

The Bible: A Book *about* Real Life

The God of the Bible is not a celestial ogre who is out to make your life miserable—rather, the God of the Bible is so interested in your earthly well-being and eternal welfare that he sent his one and only Son, Jesus Christ, to deliver you from a misery far more devastating than any autoimmune syndrome, migraine headache, or degenerative disc disease.

God has made a huge investment in your personal condition, and he is heaven-bent on applying to you every benefit of his Son's resurrection, including peace that is profound, joy overflowing, contentment that is sweet, and a soul that is settled.

The Word of God does not tiptoe around the subject of suffering as though avoiding the issue; the Bible resonates with your pain and records your lament. In short, God understands. Just consider...

- ▣ “My back is filled with searing pain; there is no health in my body. I am feeble and utterly crushed; I groan in anguish of heart. I wait for you, O Lord; you will answer, O Lord my God.” —Psalm 38:7–8, 15
- ▣ “Have you, [God], rejected Judah completely? Do you despise Zion? Why have you afflicted us so that we cannot be healed? We hoped for peace but no good has come, for a time of healing but there is only terror.” —Jeremiah 14:19
- ▣ “For he has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help.” —Psalm 22:24
- ▣ “Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. The troubles of my heart have multiplied; free me from my anguish.” —Psalm 25:16–17

