

## THE GIFT OF PAIN

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There is a rare but real disease in which the afflicted person lacks the capacity to feel physical pain. Initially, that almost sounds like a blessing; however, imagine not knowing that your hand is on a hot stove, only to learn later that you have third-degree burns. Pain is a signal that something is wrong. It is necessary for our protection in this world.

Similarly, emotional pain is an essential indicator that something is amiss and needs to be addressed. The thought of being immune to emotional suffering is understandably attractive; in fact, many of the solutions to which we turn in the midst of troublesome circumstances are an attempt to remain “comfortably numb.” These might include substance abuse, eating disorders, workaholism, etc. Even self-injury is a way to give emotions an outlet, or to mediate inner turmoil. People find ways to avoid feeling negative emotions, but in doing so, they fail to move through the healing process. They also make it impossible to feel joy.

Fear, anger, sadness, loneliness...these emotions hurt! We want to ignore them and suppress them. Yet these are signals that something is wrong in our environment, and they motivate us to choose appropriate behavior. A healthy fear of a would-be attacker prompts one to fight or flee. Righteous anger towards a child abuser urges one to seek justice. Remorse when convicted leads to repentance. Mourning the loss of a love allows one to be comforted. Experiencing loneliness moves one to seek companionship rather than keep people at a distance out of a fear of rejection.

Many Christians falsely believe that our feelings are insignificant, that, for example, it is wrong to experience a negative emotion. God created us with feelings, and encourages us to express them. The Psalmists poured out their feelings to God, and in turn, they received comfort and strength and renewed hope. We are designed to cry, to appropriately express anger, to seek relationship—just as Jesus did when He walked this earth. And when faced with hardship and temptation and unimaginable agony, we also cry out to the Father for strength.

Experiencing physical pain may lead one to seek necessary medical care. It would be foolish to ignore the clear warning signs of a heart attack. In the same way, a person experiencing emotional suffering is wise to ask for help. Take your pain and brokenness to the Lord. It has been said that we become “strong at the broken places.” Allow a counselor to help you sort through your feelings, identify them, determine if they are rooted in false beliefs, and learn to express and respond to them in a healthy way. We cannot merely “get over” painful circumstances; instead, we must go *through* them in order to heal. In Romans 5, we read that “suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit” (3b-5a).

