

Mark Houghton offers insights into the realities and spiritual challenges of living with pain over many years

PRAYING IN PAIN

I am writhing on the floor. The deep pain in my legs is hitting level four out of five, one notch higher and yelling would be inevitable. My 'prayers' come moaning rhythmically, 'Oh God, oh God, oh God...' and later – much later – I discover the Spirit of God groaning with me.¹

Thankfully most of us will never know pain like that, at least not for long. It's like the worst toothache or a broken leg. Yet chronic pain at nasty levels, carrying on years, is not uncommon. Data suggests that chronic pain affects just under 28 million UK adults and this figure is likely to increase further with an ageing population.²

For over 20 years I lived with pain hovering between three/four out of five (where five is yelling) for much of the day for over 20 years; level three is where it intrusively dominates all living. This has compelled me to search deeply for resources my faith provides: how do we pray when in pain? While we are talking mostly about physical pain here, we remember that any physical pain can bring psychological questions, depression and challenge our faith.

I define 'prayer' as any time spent maintaining our living relationship with God. This is the key to survival and keeping going. Humans are spiritual beings who need spiritual help as well as medical help to defeat the inevitable pains of life.

The origins and end of pain

God gave us complex pain fibres to help us live on earth without harm. In Genesis the Lord surveys his newly minted creation (including the pain fibres) and said 'it was very good'.³

Prolonged pain is destructive and not the will of God. In his model of prayer⁴ Jesus says, 'Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.'⁵ We know that in God's new creation there will be 'no more crying or pain.' While we await its coming in fullness, it's the calling of medics and health professionals to use our knowledge and skills to remove pain, so that God's will is also done on earth.⁶

The Bible teaches that human rebellion against God instituted what Paul called 'the law of sin and death'.⁷ Bad pain is a product of this regime, instigated by the evil one 'who come only to steal, and kill, and destroy'.⁸ But Christ came among us to destroy the works of the devil.⁹ Furthermore God is able, in this unfinished fight with the devil and pain, to turn all bad pains to good purpose – for the good of those who love him.¹⁰ So when did you last pray for victims of torture?¹¹

Being horizontal at home created time to pray more and discover bad things within that needed cleaning and healing by the great physician. God loves to relieve us of such deadly rubbish and set us free.¹² Life is far lighter and more joyful now. The Lord's searching in pain delivers us in ways that perhaps nothing else can. I remember erupting in a prayer cry, 'God this is a stupid, stupid waste of time; I think you are stupid.' I plodded to the phone and confessed it to a brother-in-Christ doctor. He promptly drove 20

miles to give me a warm talking to: 'God's shoulders are bigger than your bad language. He knows what's in your heart anyway so you might as well tell him'. God had broken in.

Tried and tested daily habits of prayer and praise keep the door to heaven open. Pursue them despite every fibre of your being saying, 'give up.' And the next level is meeting with God's people. I am grateful for two men who came to my house every week to pray. In praying with me for the world they kept me going too and their dogged prayers for less pain were answered.

If you are gifted by the Spirit with tongues, then use it. Last summer my wife and I had coffee with a young woman in London. I confessed my failure to control my tongue when trying to walk in pain. 'Try tongues,' she murmured thoughtfully. It proved a turning point to sidestep a behaviour of despair.

Dos and don'ts in praying with people in pain

How can we help as professionals and friends?

Dos:

- Get alongside the sufferer with love and compassion – you in yourself may be the only message of God's love they can still understand.
- 'Call the elders of the church to pray and anoint them with oil...' ¹³ It works. Keep seeking expert medical review for new insights or a missed diagnosis.
- Keep asking God for meaning and purpose in your disability.

Don'ts:

- Neglect to address major pain with every tool at your disposal including prayer for healing.
- Wade in first with Romans 8:28.
- Answer their question, 'Why me?' with 'Why not you?'

Pain can be a passport to being honest with God and knowing him better. Remember the agonised, 'My God my God why have you forsaken me?' was the prayerful prelude to the greatest miracle of history – the resurrection. If we believe that, then nothing, however painful, is impossible for God to transform and restore.

Mark Houghton is a retired GP based in Sheffield.

references

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| 1. Romans 8:22-25 | 7. Romans 8:2b |
| 2. Fayaz A et al. Prevalence of chronic pain in the UK: a systematic review and meta-analysis of population studies. <i>BMJ Open</i> 2016;6(6) | 8. John 10:10 NASB |
| 3. Genesis 1:31 | 9. 1 John 3:8 |
| 4. Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4 | 10. Romans 8:28 |
| 5. Revelation 21:4 | 11. Luke 4:18 |
| | 13. James 5:13-16 |