

Preach the Gospel to Yourself When Your Pain Is Chronic

Revelation 21:4

David Sunday September 23, 2018



Dear refuge of my weary soul,
On Thee, when sorrows rise
On Thee, when waves of trouble roll,
My fainting hope relies
To Thee I tell each rising grief,
For Thou alone canst heal
Thy Word can bring a sweet relief,
For every pain I feel

But oh! When gloomy doubts prevail,
I fear to call Thee mine
The springs of comfort seem to fail,
And all my hopes decline
Yet gracious God, where shall I flee?
Thou art my only trust
And still my soul would cleave to Thee
Though prostrate in the dust

Hast Thou not bid me seek Thy face,
And shall I seek in vain?
And can the ear of sovereign grace,
Be deaf when I complain?
No still the ear of sovereign grace,
Attends the mourner's prayer
Oh may I ever find access,
To breathe my sorrows there

Thy mercy seat is open still,
Here let my soul retreat
With humble hope attend Thy will,
And wait beneath Thy feet,
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Anne Steele wrote this hymn back in the 1700s. Her mother died when she was just three years old, then she had an accident early in life that left her an invalid all her days. On the night before their wedding, when Anne was 21 years old, her fiancé drowned in a river. So when she says, “Thy Word can bring a sweet relief for every pain I feel,” she’s not just saying empty platitudes. She knows of which she speaks. So let’s pray as we open God’s Word to Revelation 21, asking that His Word would do just that. Let’s ask God for the sweet relief that comes through His Holy Scriptures.

Heavenly Father, we thank You that Your Word is alive and active, able to penetrate to the depths of our being and accomplish all the purposes You have for our lives. Today, for the mourner, for those who are in pain, I pray Your Word would bring a sweet relief. I pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Let me read Revelation 21:4 out of two different versions. First, from the English Standard Version: *“He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall*

there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” The New Living Translation puts verse four like this: *“He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.”*

This is God’s Word. Praise Him for this truth.

As we’re preparing for the Refresh and Reset Conference, I’ve been preaching a series of sermons this month on “Preaching the Gospel to Yourself.” This morning I want to talk about doing that when you are going through chronic pain. When you’re in the crucible of physical pain, you might find the agony is so intense that you can’t think clearly enough to preach the gospel to yourself. That’s why we also need other people to bring the gospel to us.

As we conclude this series, I want to stress that when we talk about preaching the gospel to ourselves, we’re not suggesting that you can live the Christian life individualistically. We need the community of believers. That’s why we’re forming Gospel Communities here, to help each other preach the gospel to ourselves when we’re feeling too weak and too much in pain to do so.

Also, before I talk about chronic pain, I want to make a disclaimer. Usually when I preach on something, I ask God to help me experience what I’m preaching, so that I’m not just giving you words but I’m coming alongside you with compassion and empathy; so the message is living in me. However this week, I wasn’t sure if I wanted to pray, “God, help me to live this,” because in the 48 years I’ve had so far, I haven’t had a lot of physical pain in my life.

However through marriage, the two shall become one flesh (Mark 10:6-9), then in reality chronic pain has become part of my experience, because I’ve watched my beloved wife endure daily pain over these last eight years. We walked together along the Fox River on Friday, going over three miles which is one of the longest walks we’ve taken together since 2010. As we were walking, I mentioned to Kate, “Eight years ago in September, it was a feat for you to just walk from the kitchen to the dining room to the living room, then back around again.” That took a lot of strength.

God has shown us so much healing, so much growth and so much mercy. But all of that has been attended by chronic pain, every day, for eight years. So for the sake of my dear wife and for all of you in this church who, in a variety of ways, suffer pain, I want to speak some words of grace and hope today into your struggle. We’re going to follow a simple outline: what, why, how and when?

1. What is chronic pain?

There’s an outstanding book I read this week called Embodied Hope, by Kelly Kapic. Here’s how he defines chronic pain:

A fairly accepted definition of chronic pain is physical suffering that lasts more than three months. In other words, if you woke up to intense pain every day for 90 days, you will likely wake up on day 91 no longer surprised by your physical distress. It's become your new normal, your new reality.

That “new normal” can include things like shooting nerve pain that wakes you up in the middle of the night. Migraines. Cluster headaches that feel like your eyes are being stabbed from behind with a hot iron. Herniated discs. Arthritis. Rheumatism. Auto-immune diseases. And a lot of other things. Often with these kinds of pain issues, there are not clear causes and medical professionals are perplexed on how to prescribe treatment. Medications may be available to help alleviate the pain, but then with the medications come unpleasant side effects.

More than one-third of those who suffer chronic pain become disabled by it to some degree. So along with the pain comes financial stress, medical bills, emotional and spiritual challenges, relationship strain. It can be hard to finish a degree or hold down a job. A Christian counselor who works with people suffering chronic pain says, “Self-care can almost be a career in itself, in terms of time. Work can be a burden so that one may have to work beyond the normal time of retirement, because they typically are unable to save as much money for retirement as others.”

That is a description of chronic pain, yet we need to understand that the Bible is not silent about this human problem and struggle. The classic Old Testament example is Job. Remember Elihu, the last of the friends who come to speak to Job? He describes Job like this in Job 33:19-20: “*Man is also rebuked with pain on his bed and with continual strife in his bones, so that his life loathes bread, and his appetite the choicest food.*” You can't sleep at night. You have no appetite during the day. Elihu continues, “*His flesh is so wasted away that it cannot be seen, and his bones that were not seen stick out. His soul draws near the pit...*” Often depression—soul struggle—accompanies chronic pain. “*...[A]nd his life [draws near] to those who bring death.*”

So Job is one person in the Bible who experienced chronic pain. But he's not the only one.

In Psalm 22, King David describes the suffering servant like this:

¹⁴ *I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint;
my heart is like wax;
it is melted within my breast;*
¹⁵ *my strength is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death....*
¹⁷ *I can count all my bones—*

they stare and gloat over me.

David himself knew what it was like to have sleepless nights full of tears. He said to God in Psalm 56:8, *“You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?”* And the prophets knew their share of pain. In Jeremiah 4:19, the prophet Jeremiah cries out, *“My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain! Oh the walls of my heart! My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent.”* He cries out to God in Jeremiah 15:18, *“Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?”*

We know Jesus’ apostles in the New Testament were beaten and shipwrecked. They had sleepless nights. They were lashed with whips. Some of them probably suffered daily chronic pain as a result of this persecution. We’re not really sure what the Apostle Paul was talking about when he spoke of that mysterious thorn in the flesh in 2 Corinthians 12, but we do know he experienced pain in his body, yet he believed God was doing something redemptive through his sufferings. That’s why he could say in Colossians 1:24, *“Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.”*

When Paul says, *“I’m filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions,”* he’s not implying that there was something deficient in the work Jesus did on the cross. He is saying that there is future suffering that Christ’s servants are going to experience in order for the gospel to be seen in our lives. As we suffer, treasuring Christ in the midst of it, people see this treasure within these jars of clay and its all-surpassing worth (2 Corinthians 4:7). So Christ’s servants suffer pain.

That brings us from the ‘what’ question to the ‘why.’

2. Why do we suffer chronic pain?

Just about anyone who’s ever gone through it asks that question at some point. “Why is this happening?” They’ve all said many other people try to diagnose the reason why they’re suffering and offer a cure. Jeremy Liteman is a pastor in Missouri who has an auto-immune disorder. He describes the well-intentioned help that people offer him like this:

Too often, when I’ve mentioned my chronic pain to fellow believers, they’ve responded with a possible cure or treatment. “You should see a chiropractor.” “How much magnesium are you getting?” “Are you familiar with essential oils?” I’ve probably received more than 100 potential cures and pieces of advice in the past year, and almost every suggestion has been unique. In other words, what works for one person’s experience of pain most likely won’t work for another’s.

Along with this pain also comes social isolation. People want to figure out how to fix your pain, but when they can't figure out why it's there and how to get rid of it, sometimes they lose compassion for the person who's suffering or they just move on with their lives. The person who's suffering is still going through it every day. In the middle of the night, when shooting pains make sleep impossible, they cry out, "Why, Lord?" Is there an answer to that question?

We know when we open the Bible, there is no mention of pain in Genesis 1 and 2. In that perfect world, where Adam and Eve were surrounded by God's good and generous gifts and experienced fellowship with Him, there wasn't an ache or pain that had touched their bodies. But then in Genesis 3 they were enticed to doubt the goodness of God. They were tempted to rebel against His gracious rule. And when they revolted against God and chose to go their own way, humanity felt the first pangs of sin.

The Lord God did not wipe out our fallen parents, but He did impose discipline upon Adam and Eve and all their posterity. It sounded like this, in Genesis 3:

- To the woman, the Lord said, "*I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children.*" Can you imagine that there was a day when labor and delivery was painless?
- Then to the man, Adam, He said, "*Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life.*"

At the beginning, Eden was a sanctuary of peace and pleasure, but then it was invaded by sin which brought a rude reward along with it. Pain is now an inescapable part of the human experience. It's not because God is sadistic; it's because we are stubborn and sinful. We would have continued to despise the Word of God if our Lord didn't take drastic measures to rescue us from the hell where our sin would have led us. And one of those drastic measures is pain.

Pain can be a means of highlighting how dependent we are on God, how much we need to be rescued by Him. We think we're strong. We think we can stand firm. Then comes a wave of chronic pain that lasts for a month, two months, a year. All we can do is cry out, "Lord, help me!" There is no other refuge.

As C.S. Lewis famously said, "Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains. It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

By pain, God gets our attention—and that's a mercy. It's true that we all suffer pain because we've all sinned. Without pain, we would too easily settle in our sins and never listen to the voice of God. But this is also a truth that can be easily twisted and abused. It can be abused by people who are watching others suffer. It can be abused and twisted in the mind of the sufferer himself.

Though we know that there is a theological connection between sin and suffering, between our disobedience and our pain, we do not know the particular connection between a person's particular sins and their particular sufferings.

Sometimes we think, "If only suffering people would figure out what they've done wrong and repent of it, then they would learn whatever it is that God's trying to teach them through their suffering." If that's how we apply the logic of sin and suffering, then we're going to become just like Job's friends. With friends like that, who needs enemies? They all assume Job was going through such excruciating sufferings because he had committed some extraordinary sin. They didn't know that it was actually the opposite. They didn't know what happened in Job 1 and 2, as recorded in the Bible. They didn't realize that actually Job was suffering because he was an extraordinarily righteous man. Job didn't know that was why he was suffering either. God never told Job why he suffered the way he did.

I think that's one of the most interesting aspects of the book of Job. He never got the answer to why. All he got at the end was a grand and glorious vision of a majestic and sovereign God—and that was enough for Job. It has been said, "A suffering person might exclaim why? The answer is rarely, 'Because...' but 'Here I am.'" That's the answer the Lord gave Job: "Here I am, Job. I'm not going to tell you why, but I am going to show you Myself."

A similar thing happens in the life of Jesus. In John 9, Jesus and His disciples are walking along the way and they find a man who had been born blind. Just like Job's friends, the disciples say to Jesus, "Who sinned—this man, or his parents, that he was born blind? Whose fault is it?" Jesus answers, "It was not that this man sinned, nor his parents. That's not why he's blind. It's so that the works of God might be displayed through him. God's going to show something about Himself through this blind man."

Friends, the Lord may bring some suffering into our lives as a correction for sin. And if He does that, He will accompany the suffering with clear and specific conviction of the Holy Spirit. He won't leave us in the dark about that. He'll show us where we've gone astray, leading us to the path of repentance and restoration. That's how God works. He's gracious that way.

So if we are suffering and if—as James 5 suggests—we recognize in the midst of our suffering that there's been some sin that needs to be confessed, then we should confess our sins to one another so that we may be healed—not only of the physical suffering, but of the greater spiritual problem, which is our sin.

Sometimes suffering is corrective, but often we don't know that. It's not our job to try to figure out how someone else's suffering is related to their sin. It could be precisely the opposite, as it was with Job. It could be that God is using suffering in that person's life to keep them from sin.

This is how Charles Spurgeon understood it. All his life he suffered. As he became an adult, he got Bright's disease—a painful kidney affliction. Then he had gout which just laid him low. Along with that, he went through deep depressions. But look at what he said:

Health is set before us as if it were the great thing to be desired above all other things. Is it so? I would venture to say that the greatest blessing God can give to any of us is health, with the exception of sickness. Some men could use 30 days of rheumatism. It would mellow them wonderfully.

Spurgeon applied that to himself. He said, "I have learned to kiss the wave that throws me against the Rock of Ages." In other words, "Suffering batters and bruises me, but I'm going to kiss that wave, because it casts me upon Christ, in Whom is my righteousness. He keeps and sustains me. He is my portion forever."

It's possible, then, for believers to actually view suffering as a gift. That's how the Apostle Paul saw it in Philippians 1:29. He says to the church, "*For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him (so your faith is a gift from God), but also suffer for his sake.*" Belief and suffering—both of these have been granted to you for the sake of Christ. That's a gospel-centered perspective on suffering. He doesn't waste the sufferings of those who trust in Him. He works through our patient suffering.

That's how Joni Eareckson Tada described it at the 50th anniversary of her diving accident that made her a quadriplegic. She then suffered from breast cancer and daily chronic pain. This is what she said last year: "Honestly, I'm amazed that the last 50 years feel like only a little while."

Maybe God does that when we finally do love Jesus more, when we finally do follow Him more closely. Maybe he erases all the horror, all the despair, all the depression of the past when we learn how to trust God. He pushes all the terrible times of anguish into the background, bringing the highlights forward, the moments of hope and peace and growth. "As I look back over 50 years in a wheel chair, I just see God at work." Isn't that exciting?

Why, Lord? I may never know. But You are working for my good and for Your glory—and that's enough for a believer.

So in that book I told you about earlier, Kelly Kapic talks about a friend of his, an elder in his church, who was like a pillar spiritually. This elder had gone through intense suffering—some of it in himself, some in his family, then some in caring for elderly parents whose suffering just went on and on and on. He said, "When I said I do, I never envisioned changing my mother-in-law's diapers." That was his experience for endless days. Then one day, his friend Bob took 40

minutes, went off into a quiet place, and wrote a poem he called “A Spontaneous Lament.” It’s a back-and-forth conversation with God:

Why did my daughter’s husband break her heart?
I know, little child.
Won’t You tell me, Father?
I won’t, My son.
Why does my wife have to live in pain?
I know, little child.
Won’t You tell me, Father? It would make it easier.
It wouldn’t, My son.

Why do parents have to bury their children? It isn’t right.
It isn’t, little child.
Then get rid of death, Father.
I am, My son.
Why are Your people abused, persecuted and killed? Can’t You protect them?
I can, little child.
Then do something.
I did, My son.

Why do my parents need to finish their lives in unrelenting misery? How is that merciful?
It is, My child.
Then I don’t understand mercy.
You don’t, My son.
But it all hurts so much sometimes.
I know it does, little child.
How do You know, Father?
I have felt all the pain of sin, My son.

Can’t You make it all stop?
I can, little child.
Then do it, Father.
I started 2,000 years ago and will finish soon, My son.
I believe, Father. Help my unbelief.
I love you, My son.

That’s our God. He loves us. He is good.

3. How do we preach the gospel to ourselves when we are in pain?

So how do we preach the gospel to ourselves when we’re suffering? I’d like you to turn to a passage in the Old Testament where the prophet does exactly that—Lamentations 3. This was written during what was probably the darkest chapter in Israel’s history, when the suffering was

most intense. But at the climax of this book, we reach a place where the prophet is preaching the gospel to himself. He remembers the wormwood and the gall—the pain and the misery.

Then he says this, beginning in verse 21: *“But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope.”* What does he bring to mind? *“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”* That’s the gospel. He is a God of steadfast love. He never stops doing good to His people. He never turns away from doing us good. So there are always “ten thousand reasons for our hearts to sing.”

Then he responds to this gospel truth by saying, *“The Lord is my portion,’ says my soul.”* Do you hear that self-talk going on? *“The Lord is my portion, therefore I will hope in him. The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him.”* This is how you preach the gospel to yourself—you call to mind the daily mercies and the unfailing goodness of your God. John Owen said the great temptation when we’re going through chronic pain is for believers to have hard thoughts about God, to believe that God is angry, distant and doesn’t want us to come near. This is the battle we face.

“It’s not,” said C.S. Lewis, “that I’m in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The reason danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not, ‘So there is no God after all,’ but, ‘So this is what God is really like. Deceive yourself no longer.’” That’s our temptation—hard thoughts about God. It’s why we need one another to come alongside and say, “Oh how He loves you and me.”

Think about that, friend, next time you try to comfort someone who’s in pain, the next time you’re about to send an email that says, “If you want to cure your cancer, all you’ve got to do is eat more asparagus.” (Believe me, we got lots of these emails.) When you’re about to press send, realize that what your friend needs right now is not a possible cure, but the gospel. He needs to know that God loves him. She needs that comfort and reassurance. John Owen said, “The greatest sorrow and burden you can lay on the Father, the greatest unkindness you can do to Him, is not to believe that He loves you.” We have to tell ourselves this daily.

This is why Jude 21 says, *“Keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.”* Not that anything could ever separate us from His love, but in our thoughts, we have to remind ourselves continually, “Oh, yes, He loves me. He didn’t spare His own Son. He gave Him up for me on the cross. I know my Father loves me.”

Another thing we bring to our minds is that we have a Savior Who is sympathetic. He’s not only fully and truly God; He is also fully and truly man, in all that our humanity consists of. So when it says in Isaiah 53:3 that He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with suffering, it doesn’t mean just that Jesus had a little bit of theoretical experience with suffering. It means that Jesus

was experientially immersed in our suffering, so that our suffering became His suffering, and our pain became His pain. So He is not a distant Savior Who is mocking us when we are in pain, but He is near us. And as the Head of the body, He feels the pain of all His members. He's sympathetic and compassionate.

Think of Him on the cross, that pain of the crown of thorns, those spikes in His wrists and ankles. Think of His parched tongue cracking, dry as a desert. Think of His blood pouring out, dehydrating His suffering body. When you're in pain, remember that you were bought with a price. You're not your own. You belong to a Savior Who suffered and died for you. You'll see Him face to face and you'll recognize the scars of His sufferings. Then He will dwell with you and you with Him forever.

4. When will my pain be over?

When you're in pain, the new creation kind of seems like a mirage in the desert and you're tempted to think it will never happen. But friend, remember where you're at in the drama of redemption. Christ has already died. Christ has already risen. We're right on the cusp of the Grand Finale. Christ will come again! In the timeline of Scripture, the Bible says it's not going to be long. He is coming soon.

Back in 1952, Florence Chadwick—who had already swum the English Channel both ways (21 miles each way)—stepped off of Catalina Island into the Pacific Ocean, planning to swim 22 miles to the California mainland shore. It was a very cold and foggy day, so that as she got into the water and swam and swam and swam, she couldn't even see where she was going. She was getting very weary and exhausted physically and emotionally. Her mom was in a boat beside her and Florence cried out, "Just let it be over. I can't do this any longer." Her mom said to her, "Florence, you're close. You can make it."

But finally she was so physically and emotionally exhausted, she just stopped swimming, so they had to bring her into the boat. It wasn't until she got into the boat that she realized the shore was less than half a mile away. The next day they had a press conference and she said, "All I could see was the fog. I think if I could have seen the shore, I would have made it."

That's what pain does. It just puts fog all around us. But we walk by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:6-7). Faith sees the shore. Faith knows it's coming. Faith holds on to the promise, "I am bound for the Promised Land. It won't be long. The shore is closer than I can see and the time is coming soon." In a little while—when Jesus will wipe away every tear from our eyes and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain—then all these things will be gone forever.

Just think about it, friends. Would the new creation in all its glory be as precious to us if we had not experienced some of the pain of this fallen world? Would salvation seem as great if we had never tasted any of the wages of sin? Doesn't the fact that we'll live forever in a world where there is no more pain make the pain we do experience here a little more endurable? Not easy, not without tears, not without lament, but endurable and not without hope.

I want us to speak the final words of this sermon together. This is where Jan Stern got her words: "Gaze at God; glance at your circumstances." Realize that for those of us who hope in Christ, our pain is endurable because we know it's purposeful. It's not wasted; it's productive. So let's say these words from 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 (NLT) together:

That is why we never give up. Though our bodies are dying, our spirits are being renewed every day. For our present troubles are small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever! So we don't look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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