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## EASING THE PAIN

### *Pastor Mark Doecke*

**Last year I underwent a major knee reconstruction. It wasn't a simple operation. In fact, my surgeon and physio said it was as complex as a knee reconstruction can be with several ruptured ligaments and other damage. Amazing what can happen with one jump in a volleyball game. My surgeon said to me, 'You couldn't have done a better job of messing up your knee if you had tried!' My physio said that at my age I should have broken a bone before rupturing ligaments with what I did!**

I spent a lot of time recuperating at home after the operation. This meant spending the first two weeks, night and day, flat on my back with my leg elevated in order to reduce the swelling. It wasn't very comfortable. I had the bed moved into the lounge so I could at least watch television.

I learnt a lot during my many weeks of recuperating. Let me share with you some of the more profound things I learnt:

- I learnt that my life is not complete without a Shark vacuum cleaner, a Nutri Bullet, and a Belissimo pillow
- I learnt that when Judge Judy stops being a judge, I want to offer her a job working in our school as a behaviour management expert!
- I learnt that I am not indispensable. I thought the school would stop functioning with the Principal away for so long and that everyone would be at my door begging me to return to work to save the school. It didn't happen. In fact, the school thrived without me!
- On a serious note, I did learn a very important lesson. I learnt about pain, I learnt about trust in God. And I learnt about gratitude.

I spent three nights in hospital. The first two nights were possibly the longest nights I'd ever experienced in my whole life. No matter what the nurses gave me, nothing seemed to stop the intense pain. Even injections of morphine did little to ease the pain. On those first two nights in hospital I recall hanging on to the apparatus above me gritting my teeth and desperately wishing the pain would go away. The nurses were somewhat sympathetic, but they had no answers for my pain, other than to tell me in polite words to relax and toughen up. I guess they thought I was just another wimpy man who had never gone through childbirth and didn't know what real pain was.

On the third night a different nurse came on shift. She immediately greeted me with a friendly 'hello Pastor Mark'. She knew me from one of the churches that I regularly preach at. She then said to me, 'I hear you're having a lot of trouble managing your pain. I think I can help you with that.'

She went on to teach me a number of very useful techniques to help me deal with my pain. She actually showed me what to do. She taught me about relaxation and how to approach the spasms of pain. I had a much better night because of it. This person taught me that we can handle far more pain than what we realise. I learnt the value of people who teach one methodically and patiently. I learnt techniques in breathing (but differently to how mothers breathe during birth!). I learnt that you can prepare for spasms of pain when you know they are coming by realising that they will pass and you will survive. It was also a time where I was reminded how constant prayer in difficult times also helps one to endure pain.

This time also caused me to remember insights into pain I gained many years ago when I read a book entitled, *Pain, the Gift That Nobody Wants*. It is authored by the renowned Christian writer, Phillip Yancey, and Dr Paul Brand, a surgeon who worked amongst people afflicted with leprosy in India. This particular doctor was perhaps the first person to discover that leprosy is not contagious. He understood better than many that the awful disfigurement caused by leprosy is not caused by the disease itself, but is the result of the fact that people with leprosy don't feel pain. In this book the writers point out that pain is actually a gift. Pain is what stops us doing irreparable damage to ourselves. People with leprosy desperately wish they could feel pain because they would then be able to stop themselves, for example, getting burnt when they pick up something hot or bending over a fire before their skin becomes irreparably damaged.

Brunt and Yancey go on to take this idea further and explore other forms of pain and their place in our fallen world. Emotional pain may often be even worse than extreme physical pain. But it, too, has a place in our world. Maybe we shouldn't be so quick to avoid emotional pain and instead recognise the ways that God can teach us through it. Pain is a sign of life. Pain helps us appreciate and value those times when we are not hurting. Pain can make us more caring, and shape us into people who offer practical help to others in pain, both physical and emotional.

In short, we try to do everything we can to avoid pain, whether it is physical or emotional or even spiritual. But as the title of Brunt and Yancey's book suggests, pain is a gift.

How was my pain a gift to me?

The first thing about my pain is that I had no-one to turn to but God. A friend had given me a devotional book at Christmas time with daily readings in it that seemed to especially speak to me and what I was going through.

Two devotional words kept repeating themselves throughout this time in different ways: **trust and gratitude**.

In difficult situations, in times of pain, to trust God is to accept that God is still in control. As hard and as inexplicable as things may appear to be, God is not absent. He is there working away, always for our good, always shaping us, always leading us to better places.

The second word that kept recurring was gratitude. I learnt to be grateful for my injury and for the pain. No, I am not a masochist. I don't like pain any more than anyone else. But I did learn that pain is much easier to bear when I contemplate the blessings that come through it. My time of recuperation taught me to be less self-reliant, and accept that other people actually did want to help me. I don't think I am an easy person to help. But I was grateful for the people who would help me in practical ways, many of which related to daily functions. Like making me a cup of tea or opening and closing my chook pen each day; cleaning my house, making my bed, or bringing me delicious cups of coffee from the local coffee shop. I learnt to be grateful for the small kindnesses in life. I learnt to be grateful that God was teaching me that I am not an independent island or a machine. Even scary principals need other human beings too.

In short, I learnt that pain can be a gift. And when faced with pain I can trust in God and find the gratitude that helps ease the pain.

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