

### **Message: Pain and Life**

**Where is God when we hurt?** A few years ago, Phillip Yancy, the famous pastor and author, was in a car accident. His neck was broken. Phillip’s description of what happened is surprising and enlightening. In the hours after the accident, he was strapped to a board. The paramedics put a neck brace on Phillip. They kept moving his arms and legs asking, “Does this hurt?” and “Do you feel that?”<sup>1</sup> The correct answer: “Yes!”

**The medical team wanted Phillip’s response.** Not because they enjoyed seeing him in pain, but because it was a sign. As long as Phillip felt pain, it told them his spinal column was intact. Pain offered proof that his body remained whole. It’s normal for us to see pain as a negative. No one enjoys pain. Phillip’s story, Jesus’ parable about the prodigal son and our own experience tells us something more.

**Pain is a mark of life.** That’s important to remember as you cope with pain. Don’t numb yourselves to pain. Instead, let’s acknowledge it as an affirmation of life – in the present and the life to come.

**I’d love to promise you a long, pain-free life.** But I can’t. It would be wrong for me to do so. We all feel pain. What’s most important is how we respond. Our attitude makes a difference. It shapes our experience and the way we interact with others, particularly those who are closest to us, our family.

**The Christian drama of life can be told in a nutshell.** The world is good. The world has fallen. The world will be redeemed. Jesus came to save us and show us another way to live, blending all sorts of people into one, big family.

**God promised a time when evil will be defeated.** There will be a time when events like the shootings at the Tree of Life and Thousand Oaks will come to an end. There will be a time when natural disasters will come to an end. There will be a time when racism, hate, prejudice and intolerance will come to an end. There will be a time when poverty, disease, disability, abuse, crime and violence will come to an end.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.christianitytoday.com/iyf/hottopics/faithvalues/wheres-god-when-it-hurts-philip-yancey.html?start=1>

**Until then, God promised that the scars we accumulate from pain will somehow be used for good.** They’ll be a mark of life. Paul teaches, *“we can be sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good”* (Romans 8:28). Paul knew from personal experience. He encountered beatings, illness, shipwreck, kidnapping prison and, eventually, death for his faith.

**Paul saw God’s hand constantly at work in his life.** Paul said, *“None of this fazes us because Jesus loves us. I’m ... convinced that ... absolutely nothing can get between us and God’s love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us”* (vv36-39, MSG).

**But when we’re in the middle of the pain, it’s hard to see the good.** It’s easier to step away from those who care about us. We find ourselves questioning God, “Why did you let this happen?” and “Where are you when I hurt?” Sometimes life doesn’t look very good. It’s just difficult.

**Paul hurt like we do.** He wrote about his experience, *“I’ve tried everything and nothing helps. I’m at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn’t that the real question?”*

He shared his conclusion, *“The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does. He acted to set things right in this life of contradictions where I want to serve God with all my heart and mind, but am pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different”* (Romans 7:24-15, MSG). Nothing can separate us from the love of God.

**There’s a curious thing about humans: we have 20/20 hindsight.** What initially seemed fuzzy and unclear becomes clearer as time passes. When we reflect on the painful episodes of our lives, we see what God was able to do through our pain.

**We usually realize how much our lives were focused on temporary, material things.** Maybe we’re focused on a home or car, instead of God and our family. Maybe we’re focused on a job and how much we have in the bank account, instead of Jesus and our spouse. Maybe we’re focused on the need to be in control and to receive approval, instead of God’s Spirit and our call to make disciples.

**When we do, we’re like the first of the two sons in Jesus’ parable** (Luke 15:11-32). We want what we want. And we want it – now! That’s not always healthy.

**Loving parents give to us when we ask.** We get cars, tuition, help with house payments, bills and more. Parents lovingly support children who live across the country, often with little contact. Parents and grandparents help because they want the best for their children and they want to give them the room they need to grow. Add in remarriage and intermarriage and the picture becomes richer, but more complex.

**There are many more blended families today than before.** Blended families are families where marriage or remarriage gives children step-parents or step-siblings. Research indicates that one-third of all weddings in America form blended families. An estimated 114 million Americans have step relationships. For couples under the age of 55 who are married or cohabiting, 46% have at least one adult stepchild.<sup>2</sup>

**It’s one thing to wrestle with the challenges of raising children today.** There’s a whole other layer of complexity when we’re involved in raising the children of our spouse. Parental guidelines haven’t caught up. My prayers are with you, for there are joys as well as concerns.

**Children react emotionally and respond to situations differently in blended families, even when things are going well.** For example, Mary and her sister Kristina have struggled to cope with their parents’ divorce and their father’s remarriage. They tell their story in Christianity Today.<sup>3</sup> The breakup was amicable and they have a good relationship with their stepmom. But that doesn’t make family gatherings any easier.

**Mary, who is 16, misses Christmas past when her Mom, Dad and sister were together for presents, songs and breakfast.** So she acts out, by being irritable, staying in her room and complaining about everything – the volume of the music, what was offered for breakfast, the gifts. Even though her stepmom and Dad affirmed their love and her little sister told her to stop acting like a jerk, it wasn’t until her Mom

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.smartstepfamilies.com/view/statistics>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.christianitytoday.com/iyf/hottopics/friendsfamily/unhappy-holidays.html?start=1>

spoke to her that she found a way to enjoy the day. She couldn't see through her pain.

**Mary's Mom said something special**, “December 25<sup>th</sup> is just a date on the calendar. Christmas isn't about opening gifts. It's about the birth of our Savior.”<sup>4</sup> It seemed like those words hung in the air when Mary heard them, almost like she could reach out and touch them. Mary's pain helped her to understand what she had, right in front of her.

Christmas is more important than family traditions or which parent we'll celebrate with. It's about the love of God and how Jesus gives us hope. This isn't a Christmas message. It's good news we need every day.

**Mary didn't have a choice when her parents divorced.** She didn't have a choice about where she would live or which school she'd attend. She didn't even really have a choice about where she'd spend the holidays. Those things hurt. But Jesus, the Great Physician, wasn't giving up. God wanted her to respond, to show that her soul was whole. So she kept getting questions, “How do you feel?”

**Mary could choose how she'd deal with her feelings.** She could choose to stop feeling guilty because her Mom and Dad weren't together. She could choose to accept the fact that they would celebrate separately and not always on the same day. It wasn't easy and it took a lot of prayer, but eventually Mary made that choice. And when she did, everything else seemed to get a little easier and her holidays became a little brighter.

**We hear the good news every year, but how often do we really listen?** By listening, I mean “come to our senses” (v17) and realize there are better choices. That's what happened to Mary. It's also what happened to the younger son in Jesus' story.

**That young man was homeless.** After blowing his inheritance on extravagant living, he was left penniless. He had no means to live. Even when he got some money, he didn't know good practices. He'd spend unwisely or on unhealthy things. To top things off, the area where he was living had an economic crisis. There was a food shortage.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.christianitytoday.com/iyf/hottopics/friendsfamily/unhappy-holidays.html?start=2>

**That’s when he received a gift.** One of the local farmers let him slop the pigs in exchange for a place to crash. He got room, but no board. After a while, he was so hungry, he would have eaten the corncoobs and leftovers he was feeding to the pigs. But no one would give him anything, even slop, to eat. What an incredibly humbling and painful experience!

**We don’t know how long it took, but we know one thing, he came to his senses.** He didn’t want to live that way any more. I think his pain led him to the same four questions that Phillip found: Who do I love? Who will I miss? What have I done with my life? And am I ready for what’s next? Out of pain came good - a new focus, a new life. The pain showed Phillip, Mary and this unnamed young man what was most important. It helped them to overcome their pride, turning away from selfish desires and back to what gives real life.

**As we enter the holiday season, I extend an invitation to you:** on your dark days, remember the darkest day in human history. It was a day when evil humans rose up and violently murdered God’s Son, the only truly innocent person who every lived. But we don’t remember that day as “Dark Friday,” we remember it as Good Friday. That pain-filled day led to Easter Sunday, an empty tomb and a glimpse of God’s bright, life-giving promise to make all things new. That’s the hope we have when we embrace God’s love, the only constant, unchanging thing in all of creation.

**Read the Gospel accounts.** When you do, you’ll find only one scene where someone addresses Jesus directly: “My Lord and my God!”

**Do you know who said that?** It was Thomas, the disciple who held out, who wasn’t sure whether to believe the incredible news of the resurrection. For that, he’s forever known as “doubting Thomas.” He came to his senses. Thomas believed because of Jesus’ scars. “Feel my hands,” Jesus told him. “Touch my side.”

**In a flash of revelation,** Thomas saw the wonder of Almighty God, the Lord of the universe, stooping to take on our pain. He saw scars that had been used for good. He remembered the tear-streaked face of Jesus.

**So where is God when it hurts?** We know where God is because Jesus came to Earth and showed us. To see how God responds to our suffering, look at how Jesus responded to the tragedies of his day: with comfort, healing and, most of all, compassion - which simply means “to suffer with.” When we comfort someone, God is present. When we help someone heal, the Spirit is already at work. When we suffer with someone else, Jesus is holding them in his arms.

**Where is God when it hurts?** Right there with us, waiting for us to return to the family who loves and cares for us.

**Let’s celebrate and be grateful.**

Let us pray ...

*Lord, thank you for showing us that your goodness and mercy are all powerful. There is no darkest where the light of your Spirit can’t enter and shine. That’s good news the whole world needs! You know our hurt and pain. We don’t cope very well. Thank you for the gentle, patient, quiet way you love us. Give us the faith and assurance we need. Help us to come to our senses and to return to you, as your children in need. May we celebrate every day we are with you. Give us compassion to be with others in their suffering. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.*

**Psalm 127 (CEB)**

Unless it is the LORD who builds the house,  
the builders’ work is pointless.

Unless it is the LORD who protects the city,  
the guard on duty is pointless.

It is pointless that you get up early and stay up late,  
eating the bread of hard labor  
because God gives sleep to those he loves.

No doubt about it: children are a gift from the LORD;  
the fruit of the womb is a divine reward.

The children born when one is young  
are like arrows in the hand of a warrior.

The person who fills a quiver full with them is truly happy!  
They won’t be ashamed when arguing with their enemies in the gate.

**Luke 15:11-20 (CEB)**

Jesus said, “A certain man had two sons. The younger son said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the inheritance.’ Then the father divided his estate between them. Soon afterward, the younger son gathered everything together and took a trip to a land far away. There, he wasted his wealth through extravagant living.

“When he had used up his resources, a severe food shortage arose in that country and he began to be in need. He hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. He longed to eat his fill from what the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have more than enough food, but I’m starving to death! I will get up and go to my father, and say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son. Take me on as one of your hired hands.” ’ So he got up and went to his father.

“While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion. His father ran to him, hugged him, and kissed him.