

# 10 Positive Perspectives on Pain

University of Dallas Ministry Conference 2019

## 1. Suffering gives us an opportunity to be loved by others.

Put simply, when we suffer, we need help. It can be hard to let people help us. Our culture tells us we are supposed to be independent, not reliant on others. But that is a lie. We are made for the give-and-take of community. We are made to turn outward. We are made to depend on one another and on God. In fact, we would be in a much more spiritually precarious position if we had no weaknesses, no needs. If we had no weaknesses, we would be tempted to depend on no one but ourselves and our own strength. This would be a lonely and inauthentic human life.

The self-emptying we experience when we suffer presents us with a choice: Will we choose an inwardly-oriented hollow self-reliance (which may leave us with a vague satisfaction in our independence, but little else), or will we choose an outwardly-oriented fruitful inter-dependence?

This attitude toward our suffering is not about “dysfunctional co-dependence” or selfishly leeching off of others. Rather, it is about having a realistic disposition that recognizes within ourselves our natural need for one another and the healing power of God in our lives. Remember, Jesus himself said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick” (Lk. 5:31). Will we let Jesus the Physician heal us? Will we let others love and help us? Please say yes! Acknowledge who you are: you are a human being made to receive the love of others, and that often comes in the form of helping you bear your Cross.

**Reflect:** *Do you perceive needing the help of others as a negative thing, or as a natural part of human life? Whose love can you accept? Who wishes to help you? Will you let them?*

## 2. The suffering of others gives us the opportunity to love them.

Sometimes the Cross we bear is the suffering of another person. If we are a parent, or a caregiver, or a friend or loved one, we may experience the suffering of others with more agony than we do in our own suffering. But once again, suffering becomes an opportunity—a place to show love, a place to become more human.

To illustrate the power of suffering to draw us more deeply into the mystery of love, Pope John Paul II drew upon Jesus' Parable of the Good Samaritan.<sup>1</sup> You know the characters of this story. Which of them benefitted most from the actions of the Good Samaritan? Of course the beaten man did, but the Samaritan himself was also changed. In this opportunity to love another, he became a better, more complete human being. Those who passed by on the other side missed this chance. In their failure to love, they remained turned inward, less than human.

**Reflect:** *How has serving others changed you in the past? Whose suffering are you called to alleviate at this time in your life? How will loving them change you for the better?*

## 3. Suffering has the potential to change us for the better and strengthen us.

C.S. Lewis famously wrote that we can easily ignore pleasure, “but 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” (*The Problem of Pain*). Sometimes suffering tells us that something is wrong, something needs to change. It becomes an opportunity for conversion or changing our path. Just as physical pain is our body's way of telling us that something is wrong, suffering in our lives can be a similar message.

On another note, we have all witnessed the deepening of mind, heart, and spirit that can take place in a life that has experienced great pain. We may think we want an easy life, but we really want a great life. Sometimes this greatness emerges from pain, if we allow ourselves to be changed by it.

**Reflect:** *Have you ever experienced pain that prodded you to make a positive change in your life? Have you ever experienced pain that was due to no fault of your own but shaped you for the better? Have you witnessed this in the lives of others?*

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<sup>1</sup> Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter “On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering,” *Salvifici Doloris*, 28-30.

#### 4. Suffering can create inside of us a “space” for reflection.

Suffering has the potential to get us off the “hamster wheel” of life, to reflect on our situation in a meaningful way, to reassess and reprioritize our lives. If we won’t get off the hamster wheel ourselves, our Crosses may knock us off, giving us time and space to ponder our situation and hopefully emerge with a fresh outlook. Like the young hiker emerging from the canyon after his terrible ordeal, we may look back at our times of struggle as a blessing, for the new perspective we have may allow us to live more abundantly than we did before our pain.

**Reflect:** *Has there been a time in your life when you have had to take “time out” because of a physical, mental or emotional crisis? Did this “time out” allow you to reflect and re-prioritize your life? Or do you feel that you are on the “hamster wheel” now and you need God’s help to get off? Ask him to give you time and space to reflect and find meaning in your life.*

#### 5. Suffering teaches us to surrender, which ultimately gives us peace.

To “surrender” or to “let go” is perhaps the hardest—and the most important—thing we must do in life. Surrender is a prerequisite for love because it allows us to stop focusing on ourselves and stop demanding our own way. Even though it is difficult to do, surrender leads directly to peace of mind and heart.

There is a difference between *surrendering* and *giving up*. We shouldn’t throw up our hands in weariness and despair. Rather, we should deliberately lay ourselves down upon our Crosses, discovering in this process the paradox of the Cross—we may not control our Crosses—they may have come into our lives without our consent—but *we control how we carry them*. Surrender is not *giving up*; it is *giving over*, giving ourselves over to God and his very-long-term (read “eternal”) plan, giving ourselves over in faith and hope. When we do this, we will find that we too have the strength of Christ—who wrestled with his own will in the Garden—but who ultimately surrendered himself to the Cross and then was raised in glory.

This surrender, this “letting go,” prepares us for our final surrender, which is death. If we practice, and if we learn to do it well, then we are always ready when we must die to self, or when we must actually die. In some ways, surrender runs contrary to human nature, which tries to control everything, even the uncontrollable. But in some ways, surrender is the most natural thing in the world, for we were made to give ourselves over to others and to God.

**Reflect:** *What Cross have you resisted but need to surrender to? Do you have a difficult family member that you need to accept and stop trying to change? Is there a sinful behavior or a selfish attitude that you want to give over to Christ? Do you need to acknowledge the pain of a past event so you may heal from it and move on? Reflect on Jesus’ struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane—his emotional agony as he faced his own Cross. Ask Jesus for his strength. I am willing, Lord! Not my will but yours be done!*

## 6. Suffering allows us to imitate Christ.

*“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” (Lk. 9:23).* A disciple is more than just a student. A disciple does more than learn information from the teacher. A disciple believes deeply in the teacher’s message. A disciple wants to live as the teacher lives. A disciple *believes in* and *conforms himself or herself to* the teacher.

Toward the end of his ministry, Jesus was often heard predicting his death. His disciples, he knew, would not escape a similar fate. It would not happen immediately for them, but most of them would suffer and ultimately die for being his followers. We do not live in a time or place where we are likely to be martyred. But taking up our Crosses is still something we do—something we *must* do. And as you can see from Jesus’ words above, we must do it *daily!*

Jesus also said, “A disciple is not above his teacher” (Mt. 10:24). Why in the world would we want to be? We want to be like Christ, so that we can be with him. We want to be like Christ, because this is what we were made for. Even if it means there are Gethsemanes and Golgothas that await us, we will follow him, we will be like our Teacher.

There is indeed some consolation in knowing that in suffering, we are conforming ourselves to the image of the Crucified One, who became the Risen and Glorified One.

**Reflect:** *In what ways do you try to imitate (or follow) Christ? You will never be crucified, but how are your Crosses—large or small—an imitation of the Crucified One? Does this help you feel closer to him? Does it give you expectation and hope for your own Resurrection?*

## 7. Suffering allows us to actually *share* in his sufferings.

A text from the book of 1<sup>st</sup> Peter takes us one step deeper into this mystery. Peter insists that in suffering, we not only *imitate* Christ, but we *share in his sufferings*:

*“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.... Yet if any of you suffers as a Christian, do not consider it a disgrace, but glorify God because you bear this name” (1 Pet. 4:12-13, 16).*

St. Paul of course had the same idea when he wrote in Philippians: *“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death” (Phil. 3:10)*. His message is even more plainly spoken in Galatians: *“I have been crucified with Christ” (Gal. 2:19)*.

Neither Peter nor Paul ever speaks of suffering just for the sake of suffering. Rather, when we share the Cross of Jesus—when we are crucified with him—we know we will share in the joy and triumph of his glorious Resurrection: *“For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Rom. 6:5)*. This is why theologians insist that the Cross and Resurrection are *one event*: the Paschal Mystery. When we are on the Cross with Christ, sharing in his sufferings, it is only a matter of time until we are raised with him to new life!

**Reflect:** *Say these words over and over, slowly and with conviction: “If I die with him, I will rise with him!” How can these words become a part of your daily life? How can they shape your perspective on life?*

## 8. Suffering allows us to share in the redemptive work of the Cross.

Now we are moving even more deeply into the reality of the Cross and our participation in it. We *imitate* him; we *share in* his sufferings; and because we share in those sufferings, we even share in *what they do!* We share, friends, in the redemption of the world! The Cross has meaning because *it did something*—it bought back (“redeemed”) the human race, it has the power to transform us from the image of Adam into the image of Christ. And we do not stand by, passive recipients of all this grace—no, we *participate in* this process through faith and love, and even through suffering.

A lot of theological ink has been spilled over Paul’s statement in the book of Colossians: “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I *complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions* for the sake of his body, that is, the Church” (1:24). What is lacking in Christ’s suffering? Only the participation of every human being! We complete what is lacking, we fill it. Our suffering becomes a creative force, and we are sunk so far into the mystery of Christ that we are re-made, we become a new creation ourselves.

As John Paul II explained, “[T]he Redemption . . . *remains always open to all love* expressed in *human suffering*. In this dimension—the dimension of love—the Redemption which has already been completely accomplished is, in a certain sense, constantly being accomplished. Christ achieved the Redemption completely but at the same time he did not bring it to a close.”<sup>2</sup>

When we suffer with love in our hearts, we are not only *imitating* him, not only *sharing* with him, we are on the Cross with him, we are *working* with him! We can love others by intentionally joining ourselves with Christ and allowing ourselves to sink deeply, all the way, into the spiritual mystery of being “in Christ.”

**Reflect:** Meditate on the words of Jesus: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (Jn. 12:24). Ask yourself: How did Jesus’ death bear fruit for others? Do I believe that my suffering can bear fruit? Ask Jesus to foster this faith in your heart, so that your suffering may have even more meaning “in Christ.”

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<sup>2</sup> Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter “On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering,” *Salvifici Doloris*, 24.

## 9. When I am weak, then I am strong because the power of Christ dwells in me.

This reality is the next logical step in our journey into the Cross. When we empty ourselves in imitation of Christ, in our sharing with Christ, we create a space within ourselves for the power of Christ to dwell. This was an unshakeable conviction of St. Paul. Indeed, Paul felt that he had been “taken over” by Christ!<sup>3</sup> This may sound exciting but a bit threatening—are we becoming “less ourselves” when we become “more Christ”? No, we never lose our identities when we unite ourselves to Christ, not even when we are “in Christ.” In fact, the closer we are to him, the more ourselves we become.

We may sometimes feel that we are losing ourselves in our Crosses. In these times, pray for the power of Christ, the power of the Crucified Christ. This is a power the world does not understand, but you do: *“For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18).*

On the Cross, we do not lose ourselves. We find ourselves. Here we are one with our God who is love (cf. 1 Jn. 4:8). Here we learn that we are not ourselves without him. Here we learn that the power of his love is the greatest power in the universe, and that it was meant for us. This is the strength we find in our weakness: the power of Christ, the power of love, the power of God.

**Reflect:** *Does your suffering make you feel empty? Or does it fill you with negative emotions like anger, bitterness and a sense of futility? When we are empty, we yearn to be filled, and when we are filled with negative feelings, we yearn to replace them. We can “fill ourselves” with all kinds of things: distractions, entertainment, food, drink, and harmful substances. But as we know, this kind of “filling” leaves us even emptier than before. Pray only to be filled with one thing: Jesus Christ and him crucified (cf. 1 Cor. 2:2). Pray only to be filled with the power of his love.*

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<sup>3</sup> This is Raymond Brown’s literal translation of Philippians 3:12 (*An Introduction to the NT*, Yale University Press).

## 10. In suffering, God is near, very near.

Many spiritual concepts, including those regarding suffering, may seem abstract. But if there is anything to wrap your mind around, anything to cling to, anything to believe in, let it be this final point: *When we suffer, God is near.* Period. You may not see him, you may not feel him, you may not directly experience his presence. You will recall that Jesus also felt abandoned on the Cross—but *was he?* He most certainly was not! As they say, even on cloudy days, the sun still shines. You can't see it or feel its warmth on your skin, but it is there, shining away.

When we say that God protects us, this is really what we mean. He protects us in a larger way, an enduring way, by being a powerful presence in our lives. A great power was at work on the Cross, even in the emptiness Jesus felt for a time. That power was the abiding presence of the Father. Did you know that Mother Teresa felt a spiritual darkness—doubts, emptiness, an almost unbearable distance from God—for nearly 50 years? And yet we know she had the power of one very intimate with the Spirit of Christ.

God is every bit as present to you and in you. He is protecting you by loving you, by keeping his promise to never leave you nor forsake you. He has not prevented all bad things from happening to you. But in some way, he has hidden you under the shadow of his wings, he has written your name on the palms of his hands, and he will hold you there until the day you say with Christ, "It is finished" (Jn. 19:30).

A French writer named Paul Claudel wrote two sentences that changed my life. These words bring together the truths of Scripture and the facts of real life. It is my prayer for you today that these words can change your perspective as they changed mine: *"Jesus did not come to explain away suffering or remove it. He came to fill it with his presence."*

The presence of God is the presence of Absolute Love. It is another paradox to say that in the midst of our suffering, we are intensely loved. But we have only to look upon the Cross to see and to know that it is true.

**Reflect:** *Allow your heart to be comforted by the assurance that as surely as the sun shines above the clouds, the Lord is truly right beside you. Hear his voice as he speaks to you in love: "Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand" (Isa. 41:10). I trust in you, Lord! Hide me in the shadow of your wings! (Ps. 17:8)*