

To God Be The Glory

Back when I was in college, weightlifting was popular. We were taught that if you're doing it right, you feel the burn in your muscles. We would say, "No pain, no gain." In movies and on TV we would see beefy folks straining against the weights and yelling out an agonizing roar as they conquered the next level. "No pain, no gain," they'd say with a tortured smile.

Then people took this philosophy too far. Recreational exercisers, especially people over 40, were injuring themselves by pushing too hard. Then they made their injuries worse by "playing through the pain." So people trying to become physically fit had to be taught that pain is your body's way of telling you you've overdone it.

I'm no exercise expert, but it seems to me that if you are going to get stronger or more physically fit, you're going to experience "the burn" or some soreness in your muscles. Understood properly, it's true: **NO PAIN, NO GAIN.**

Take this idea into the spiritual realm. Does the phrase work here? Generally, yes. Let's explore it with Hosea's message as a backdrop. The time is about 735 BC. The spiritual health of God's people is poor and getting worse. God sends them prophets such as Micah and Isaiah with messages directly from him, but the people won't listen. So God has decided to bring foreign armies to attack the people he loves. Yes, you heard that correctly: God purposely brought pain to

his beloved people. Remember: no pain, no gain. In the verse before our lesson the Lord says, ¹⁴*"I will be like a lion to [my people]... I will tear them to pieces and go away."* "But why would God do that? I thought he was the God of love!" That's just it. God loves his people too much to let them get away with wrongdoing. He knows that if he lets his people remain impenitent, he will lose them eternally. That's why he says in our text: ¹⁵*"I will go back to my place until they admit their guilt. And they will seek my face; in their misery they will earnestly seek me."*

"Well, what were the people doing that was so wrong?" Good question. They stopped appreciating God's grace, as in: "You know God loves you." "Eh." As soon as people don't find God's good news valuable in and of itself—no matter who's proclaiming it, or how few bells and whistles are used to set it forth—as soon as the forgiveness of sins through Jesus' blood no longer carries weight with people, watch out! The next step will likely be, "I'm not as bad a sinner as God says I am." Then comes a turning away from God's Word. They won't make time to listen to the Bible or read it. So the Lord sends messengers, urging the people to repent and turn back to the Lord. But the people won't listen to them either. Their problem keeps them... from the solution to their problem.

So what's God supposed to do? He doesn't want anyone to end up in hell (see Ezekiel 33:11). It doesn't matter that hell is what our sins actually deserve (see Luke 12:47-48, 2 Cor 11:15)—God does not

want that for us. So in Bible times the Lord would send lesser judgments, like drought and famine, or too much rain that triggers mudslides, or an earthquake, or locusts. If the Lord is still following the same pattern today here, he could send excessive snow or an extra-cold winter, or I suppose even a virus, as in: Maybe some discomfort or loss will wake people up. But where do God's people turn? In Hosea's day they turn to false gods: "Help us, O Baal! Our tummies are empty and they hurt." Well, there's the pain, but God hasn't gotten the gain he's looking for yet. So the Lord sends the Arameans, who attack Israel and Judah. Now do the people turn to their Lord, who promised to save them from all trouble? No, they turn to the Assyrians for help. "The Assyrians? Really? At that time the Assyrians were godless and cruel!" God's people would say to his prophets, "We aren't listening to you. We will not repent and turn away from evil. Our problem is with these Aramean armies who want to kill us, not with the Lord. After all, we bring God some sacrifices sometimes. We need soldiers, not prayers." Nope. Wrong diagnosis. So they had pain without gain.

Friends, if you've got a problem—and it doesn't have to be a big problem like an army breathing down your neck. It could be a little problem: you stub your toe, you bite your cheek, your child is extra naughty or your parent is extra unreasonable, your co-worker is unusually competitive, your car unexpectedly has

trouble, you've been having unusual symptoms and you wonder if you've got an unknown illness, a ticket shows up in your mailbox from a red light camera when you were driving in the big city—who can list all the potential pains God might send for our gain? If you've got a problem, first deal with the spiritual component. The first question to ask yourself is: "To whom will I turn for help?" Are you going to rely on your own strength, wisdom, patience, and courage? They have not kept you trouble-free. In Psalm 50 your Lord promises: "*Call upon me in the day of trouble. I will deliver you.*" What a great promise! When you are having a problem, talk to the Lord about it. You don't have to get all the words right. It's not about perfection. It's about seeking the Lord's face earnestly (v. 15), with an undivided heart, not trying to find a way to hold on to something that's bad for our soul.

Which leads to the second question to ask yourself when you face trouble: "Is there any area in my life where God now holds second place, or third, or last place?" God wants first place in our hearts no matter what else is going on. That's the gain the Lord seeks from us. Listen to what he said through Hosea after sending his people a measure of pain: *I will go back to my place until they admit their guilt.* If you've been praying to God, and he hasn't answered you in the way you think he should, check to see if there's an area in your life where you have not yet admitted guilt for your sinful attitudes or speaking

or actions.

In Hosea's day God really wanted the pain he sent to bring the gain he sought?

Quoting the people Hosea writes:

6:1 "Come, let us return to the LORD. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds. 2After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence. 3Let us acknowledge the LORD; let us press on to acknowledge him. As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth."

Sounds like wonderful things for believers to say about the Lord, doesn't it? Such confidence!

"He will heal, he will bind up, he will restore, he will appear, he will come."

What faith, right? It's like a child jumping into a swimming pool, expecting that Daddy will catch them. We have confidence that the Lord is going to catch us; so we rely on his grace alone.

I love how these verses challenge a faulty American value. We are regularly told things like: suffering is caused by bad upbringing, lack of opportunity, a genetic flaw, insufficient social institutions, or the unwillingness of politicians to make the hard choices. A few people who don't believe in God think suffering is a cosmic mistake. Solutions they might suggest for these problems? Take a pill. Work harder. Be wiser. Get lucky. Roll with the changes. Even church people have erroneously complained, "But I have

God's forgiveness! Why should I suffer any earthly troubles for my sins?" But in our text the people rightly say that God tears to pieces and injures. In fact the Bible is full of examples where the Lord used individuals or armies to bring pain to people. Why? To gain their repentance. God is serious about obedience. He expects us all to conform our hearts, our words, and our behaviors to his commands.

God is also serious about saving us. As Hosea writes: *1 "He will heal us and gently care for us."* God's chastisements may seem random or thoughtless, but in the Bible we see that they are actually targeted and purposeful, because sin is worse than a scratch you spray some anti-bacterial on and cover with a Donald Duck Band-Aid. God's grace is also targeted and purposeful: he acts in ways that are careful, appropriate, and effective, because God's grace is better than a naive wish that things will get better. Sometimes God has to dig deep to remove the tentacles of evil. It causes pain. Yet patients trust their doctors to remove the cancer even though surgery and chemo causes pain. Children can hold still while mom or dad digs out a splinter. When we recognize the skill and love behind the hands intent on relieving our pain, we can trust.

In Israel's case, however, God was not convinced of their sincerity. Listen to what the Lord says in the verses that come after our text. *4 "What can I do with you,*

Ephraim? What can I do with you, Judah? Your love is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears. ⁵[This is why] *I cut you in pieces with my prophets, I killed you with the words of my mouth; my judgments flashed like lightning upon you.* Ah, so then earlier when we heard the people say, “*He has torn us to pieces,*” and “*He has injured us,*” they were probably talking about their military defeats and the hefty taxes they now paid to their conquerors. And so the ‘healing’ and ‘binding up’ they hoped for was ‘the removal of their foreign oppressors.’ Although the Israelites said, “*Let us press on to acknowledge the LORD,*” they didn’t mean, “We’re truly sorry we loved ourselves and others more than we love you, God.” They simply meant, “Let’s go offer the Lord a few sacrifices to assuage his anger.” That’s why God goes on to say: *“I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.* God isn’t dense. He’s heard lots of people profess their love for him, and then watch them a few hours later running after whatever their heart desires. Often their faith and love don’t last any longer than it takes for the sun to burn off a morning fog. So the Lord sends their friends and their pastors to cut their stubborn heart to pieces, to kill their self-righteous sinful flesh, to shatter their pride with the law. Do his people really think they can satisfy the Lord just by speaking a lovely bit of liturgy, singing some spiritual songs, and bringing an offering? Do they think they can escape the pain of saying, “O dear Lord, I am

ashamed to have sinned against you”?

What the Lord wants is faithful love, the same thing he has shown us. During Lent as we earnestly seek the face of our Lord (v. 15), let’s look to the cross, where God chose to abandon his own Son. God put Jesus through the hell of his silence so that Jesus cried out, “*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*” Jesus’ pain was our gain. Now he wants us to acknowledge him, to trust in him alone as our Savior and Lord.

And how can anyone tell that we trust the Lord? Because repentance and God’s full forgiveness lead us to change the way we do things. Where we have been lazy, we will be joyfully diligent. Where we have been overzealous, we will back off to the limit of our actual responsibilities. Where we have spoken hurt, we will utter loving words from a loving heart. Where we have been selfish, we will think of others. Where we have been trusting ourselves first, we will trust our Savior first. We’ll stop saying things like, “I can’t hold my children and my friends accountable; I don’t want to lose their love.” We’ll show our loyalty to God, also by praising him throughout the day. We’ll look out for the spiritual and physical needs of our fellow humans, especially those who belong to the household of faith. We will extend forgiveness to those who wrong us, the same way God forgives us fully and daily. These are the kinds of gain God wants when he sends us pain. God’s kind of

pain leads to God's kind of gain.