

# Guilt: Our Spiritual Pain

by David F. Maas

*Forerunner*, July 1996

How many of us during our lives have encountered real, excruciating, physical pain? How many of us wish that pain did not exist—that God had never created any such thing as pain?

Though most of us would gladly avoid pain at all costs, we would not want to find ourselves without the capacity to feel it. Most parents would not want their children not to have the ability to sense pain. According to the *Modern Medical Encyclopedia*, "pain is important as the body's chief warning signal that something has gone wrong."

We should consider pain useful in giving warning of possible danger—indicating the presence and nature of a disease, injury or harmful stimulus, such as an electric shock or a hot stove. The great God has placed within our bodies a vast network of millions of pain nerves, specifically designed to alarm the central nervous system that danger or potential danger exists.

To a person in excruciating pain—the kind transmitted from a broken limb—the first thing he thinks of is getting rid of the pain. That desire is only natural. But pain reduction at any cost is not entirely desirable! Pharmaceutical researchers have developed drugs (called analgesics or narcotics) specially designed to mask the sensation of pain. Unfortunately, they often do not come remotely close to eliminating the real, underlying cause.

Horse racing authorities have levied stiff fines on trainers for injecting drugs into their horses' limbs when pulled tendons or bone fractures cause them pain. Some people, many of them not even athletes, seem to exist on a regimen of cortisone shots or muscle relaxants, completely overriding the body's natural warning system to cease and desist. Would they have the same response if the engine warning light on their dashboard flashed on?

We should not view pain as an enemy. Its purpose is to alert us, just as the engine light on the car's dashboard indicates low oil pressure, high water temperature or an empty gasoline tank. Pain means *warning*!

Back in 1970, I was involved in a car accident that left me with some severed nerves behind my elbow. Ever since that time, I have not had the capacity to feel significant pain from the base of my wrist to the bottom of my elbow. One summer while mowing the lawn, I had to make an adjustment on the mower. In making the adjustment, I did not feel my forearm resting on the blistering hot manifold of the lawnmower—until I could smell hair and flesh burning. I very much appreciate the capacity to feel pain in other parts of my body.

## A Spiritual Equivalent

God fortunately has provided for us a capacity to feel pain on the spiritual dimension as well as the physiological. We could say that the spiritual equivalent of physical pain is guilt. The late Meir Kahane humorously referred to guilt as "Jewish AIDS," as the Jews seem to carry past failures like millstones around their necks.

As pain drives us to seek relief and comfort for our physical ailments, guilt also drives us to seek spiritual remedy. In his book *Feelings*, Willard Gaylin maintains that,

Guilt is not a "useless" emotion; it is the emotion that shapes so much of our goodness and generosity. It signals us when we have transgressed from codes of behavior which we personally want to sustain. Feeling guilty informs us that we have failed our ideal. We should not use "Jesus' grace" as a salve or buffer to mask the spiritual pain indicators God has mercifully given us.

Like our attitude to physical pain, we should likewise not consider guilt our real enemy. Sin, not guilt, is the true culprit! Guilt simply serves as a set of symptoms warning us that we have transgressed one or more of God's living laws. Because in our conscious mind we have willingly submitted to God's law, we now have the capacity to feel spiritual hurt. The apostle Paul suggests that, "if it had not been for the Law, I should not have recognized sin or . . . have had no consciousness of sin or sense of guilt" (Romans 7:7, *The Amplified Bible*).

God has made it clear that we cultivate and maintain the ability to feel spiritual pain in order to move us away from behavior that endangers us. Paul assures the Corinthians:

Yet I am glad now, not because you were pained, but because you were *pained into repentance* [that turned you to God]; for you felt a grief such as God meant you to feel, so that in nothing you might suffer loss through us or harm for what we did. For godly grief and the pain . . . produce a repentance that leads and contributes to salvation and deliverance from evil, and it never brings regret; but worldly grief . . . is deadly. . . . For [you can look back now and] observe what this same godly sorrow has done for you and has produced in you. (II Corinthians 7:9-11, *The Amplified Bible*. Emphasis ours.)

David frequently expresses gratitude for being led back from spiritual pain to spiritual comfort. For example, in Psalm 119 he exclaims, "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word. . . . It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes" (verses 67, 71).

## **A Moral Governor**

Without the capacity to feel spiritual pain, we would veer hopelessly off course. Guilt is like the raised markers on the road that indicate that we have driven into the next lane or off onto the shoulder. Thankfully, God Almighty has mercifully installed a kind of spiritual gyroscope, or a type of sonar or radar, that provides continuous feedback for our behavior.

Conscience acts as a moral governor, inflicting pain for our good for bad behavior, and infusing us with pleasure and joy for good behavior. Paul writes that even people who are not yet called by God are still equipped with a moral guidance system, which we call the conscience (Romans 2:14-15). With the addition of the Holy Spirit, our conscience should be finely tuned. When David says in Psalm 51:12, "Restore to me the joy of Your salvation," he had obviously suffered acute and intense spiritual pain and greatly desired the comfort of knowing he was back on the right track.

In I Timothy 4:2, Paul speaks of people searing or cauterizing their consciences with a hot iron. Willard Gaylin writes that "the failure to feel guilt is the basic flaw in the psychopath, or antisocial person, who is capable of committing crimes of the vilest sort without remorse or contrition." We could describe the unpardonable sin as the incapacity to feel remorse or a person's determination to

override every warning signal of guilt. If people repeatedly violate their consciences, masking their guilt by using escapist "analgesics," the consequences become devastating. Without the stimulus of spiritual pain, they become incapable of changing their behavior.

This seared conscience is the ultimate result of the process Paul describes in Romans 1:28: "And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over [abandoned them, *Twentieth Century New Testament*] to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting." Though God desires to grant all men repentance (II Peter 3:9), a person can reach a point where it is no longer possible because in his perversion and wickedness, he has burned his conscience to cinders.

We need to thank God for the capacity to feel both physical and spiritual pain. It provides us with the warning and the motivation to change—to be transformed into the image of our Savior Jesus Christ. In accepting His sacrifice for our sins, we take upon ourselves the responsibility—with God's help—to diagnose and eradicate the sins that cause the spiritual pain in the first place, to bring us into vibrant spiritual health. As the author of Hebrews writes, "Now no chastening [painful discipline] seems to be joyful for the present, but grievous; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Hebrews 12:11).