

Redeeming the Pain

| Where is God in suffering?

■ by Dr. Janet Irvine, Clinical Psychologist



Many years ago, when my kids were still toddlers, I fell into a deep, dark depression for many years. I was tired, negative, crabby. I could hardly sleep at night, and cried through the day when the kids weren't looking. I put them to bed and then sat on my couch, crying and crying, night after night.

With so little energy, I had to resign from everything I was doing at church. It was a time of dark desolation; so much so that my pastor even asked if I still cared about our church! I spent my days running after my two active boys, carrying on with exhausting activities and appreciating the care my friends provided for them. I decided however, that no matter what, I would still go to church.

But God, who was the most important person in my life, felt very far from me. I could not pray. Reading scripture made me cry even harder. Music was intolerable. Church was the worst place of all, and the words that had comforted and held me for so long were like dry dust. I cried and cried there, explaining my tears away to curious parishioners as "bad allergies." I felt forsaken and lost, and often had no idea what was going on inside to make me so sad.

I was encouraged to seek counseling, which I did for several years. It dredged up lots of pain I didn't know I had. My therapist encouraged me to try medication. I was humiliated and embarrassed, but I did. The medication provided relief for some of the physical symptoms and the therapy helped me work through the emotional pain.

Like anyone experiencing pain, the questions welled up, over and over...why me? What have I done to deserve this? Where is God? Has He left me? Why were all the things that once brought comfort so full of pain?

One day, crying as usual in church, I sensed a prayer bubble up from deep within: "redeem the pain..." What did this mean? It was so clear and intense that I knew it was important. It threaded through my days and nights as the only prayer I could pray.

Slowly it dawned on me that God might use this darkness, somehow, to bring light somewhere else. It seemed like a rather far-fetched notion, but I began to believe that maybe something unknown but healing would happen.

Another day, as I knelt at the communion rail fighting back tears, I looked at the crucifix above me. Suddenly I realized "God does His best work with broken people!" At that moment, the pastor placed a piece of broken bread into my outstretched hand. Christ, broken on the cross; Christ in broken bread; Christ in broken me. Christ, who had been the Redeemer through the pain of the cross, was the ultimate example of redeeming the pain.

I realized, much much later, that God, indeed, took this desolation and helped me to know Jesus on a whole different level. He loved me even when I could scarcely move, when I contributed nothing to the church, except my outstretched hands to take communion. I came to really believe he loved me unconditionally simply for being me, and not for what I did. Redeeming the pain, bringing light from darkness.

As for doing His best work with broken people – well, I sure fit the broken part. And where the cracks and the breaks are still healing up, I hope He is leaking out of me with His love. And redeeming the pain.

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