

The Place of Pressing: Finding Purpose in Pain

Eric Praschan (M.A.T.S., 2006)

Academic Advisor, University of Missouri Graduate School

A few months ago, I was seated in the doctor's office next to my wife, Stephanie, as the neurologist matter of factly stated, "The MRI tests revealed that you have spots in your brain and neck indicating signs of multiple sclerosis (MS)." My wife had been struggling with numerous health issues for nearly two years. Due to the variety of symptoms exhibited in her body, several different doctors had struggled to nail down the primary problematic issue. After months of tests, diagnoses, re-diagnoses, a frustrating lack of answers, and an unpredictable roller coaster of emotions, we finally had an answer.

The heart is often unprepared for painful experiences in life. When great pain finds us, it is difficult to gain our bearings, for we have entered a place of pressing. The place of pressing is a season of pain that brings spontaneous tears, a lump in the throat, and long nights with too many unanswered questions and too little sleep.

Pain is a constant reminder of our human frailty, as well as an unpleasant, yet powerful, reminder of our total dependence upon God. The irony of pain is that God can use it to spark spiritual growth within us. God has an uncanny way of touching us deeply when we are exposed and honest before Him during the intense vulnerability that occurs during painful experiences. Therefore, our attitude toward pain determines our availability to allow God to

usher growth into our lives during difficult circumstances.

Pain bears the soul in raw form, causing honest questions and reflections that might not normally occur. When plodding through the place of pressing, pretenses or façades do not work; on the contrary, the soul's struggle for strength and the need for God's grace collide in full force. Pain brings us to a place of brokenness where we must choose to trust God while we are feeling too helpless to rely on ourselves for answers or strength.

Jesus entered the place of pressing on a night when His closest friends could not even stay awake to comfort Him. He knelt down in the Garden of Gethsemane, troubled and stricken with pain. His night was filled with spontaneous tears, a lump in the throat, too many unanswered questions, and too little sleep. He understood the purpose of His pain, and although His heart yearned for an easier way than taking each agonizing step through the place of pressing, He offered a prayer that gives us the perspective on pain which God would have us choose: "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:41).

Although not glamorous or desirous, the process of pain is essential for growth. Embracing pain is contrary to our natural tendencies, but true trust in God's

sovereignty necessitates that we open ourselves to His leading, even if taking that path means following Him through the place of pressing. When faced with a season of struggle, we often focus exclusively on the pain; by choosing to adopt Jesus' perspective of pain, though, we will look for God's larger purpose in the midst of the season of struggle rather than focus only on the reality and side effects of the pain.

King David also wrestled with painful experiences throughout his life, but he did not emphasize pain as the outcome. His Psalms resonate with the acknowledgment of God's faithfulness in the midst of his own frustration, confusion, and pain (Psa. 69:1-2, 13-17; 77:1-20; 86:1-7; 102:1-28). Similarly, Paul attested that God's strength is made perfect in our weakness (2 Cor. 12:9-10). C. S. Lewis pinpointed the way in which God uses pain to impact us and arrest our attention: "Pain insists on 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."¹

An accurate perspective of pain must be set against the backdrop of God's consistent character. Consequently, when we enter the place of pressing, the understanding remains that God will continue to be the bedrock upon which the soul can depend regardless of the surrounding circumstances. God did not promise life without pain (John 16:33). But even when we hurt, when we weep, when we suffer—He is still with us, and is keenly interested in the process of our working through the reality of pain. When we find ourselves entering the place of pressing, it would be easy to ask why it is happening or attempt to escape. However, God is more interested in how we respond to

the painful season, than He is in answering our questions of why we are experiencing it.

Our best response to pain should be a firm resolution to trust God regardless of what happens. It is His faithfulness in the midst of pain that enables us to trust Him. God may bring instant healing or deliverance, or opt not to do so because it may not be the most beneficial action at the time. A season of victory or celebration may not be forthcoming, but God has much to teach us in the midst of our struggle. Growth does not come without stretching, and the place of pressing is the perfect environment that God can use to foster spiritual maturity within us. In the place of pressing, we learn to trust His heart even when we cannot see His hand; we learn to believe His truths even when we cannot feel His touch; we learn to know who He is even when we do not know what He is doing.

My wife is currently undergoing weekly treatments for MS. This will be a lifelong journey of learning to work through the process of pain. Our faith is being built stronger each day as we seek to see the situation through God's eyes instead of our human eyes alone. Only with His perspective can we fully understand the value of the place of pressing, and only then can we begin to comprehend how precious pain can be in bringing us to a place of surrender. We understand that God will heal her body, whether in this life or the next. At the core of this process, however, we are discovering how God is more interested in a deeper relationship with us than in simply healing a disease. God can minister to us just as powerfully through the process of pain as He can through the product of a complete healing, so we must choose to trust Him tenaciously in the place of pressing

because only with trust in Him can we perceive the purpose in the pain.

Jesus serves as our prime example on how to respond to the place of pressing: “Not my will, but Yours be done.” It is in choosing this perspective that we can grow closer to God in ways we did not know were possible. We discover the beauty and the purpose in the pain as God uses this season of struggle not to destroy us but to grow us, not to shatter us but to rebuild us, and not to wound us but to heal us. This initiates a new perspective. Instead of asking God, “Why am I in pain?” we can begin asking Him, “What do You want to teach me in this pain?” Only then can we truly understand the purpose to be found in the place of pressing.

The place of pressing is not about the intensity or longevity of the pain. In fact, it is not about the pain at all. It is about one thing and one thing alone: knowing Him more. As we surrender to His will and allow Him to guide us through the place of pressing, we will come to understand that pain is not an ending of our lives but actually a progression in our lives when we place it in His hands. We learn that the power of His faithfulness far outweighs the potency of the pain. This is why we can choose to place our focus on Him and not on the pain itself. It is this focus of knowing Him more that enables us to enter the place of pressing with hope in Him, to walk through the place of pressing with trust in Him, and to leave the place of pressing with stronger faith in Him when the season of pain has finally ended.

¹C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York, NY: MacMillan, 1944), 91.