

ABSCESS, ROOT CANAL AND LESSONS FROM THE PAIN

Recently I had as miserable a week as any I can recall. One night I woke up to a dull throb under a large molar on the bottom left side. Dull became acute; the molar shared its pain with the whole jaw, then cheek, eye, temple, and soon the entire left side of my head. In one week I was host to the natural birth, nasty childhood, rebellious adolescence, sociopath adulthood of a monster abscess. For its egregious crimes against the human, the abscess was put to death by root canal. After more than a week a whole night's rest felt heavenly.

It is, however, not a week to forget. As I remember and wince over this painful time, I have deeper appreciation for people who live in *constant* pain, for whom no root canal or other procedure will ever bring full relief. People for whom there is at best fitful sleep, the attempt to balance the benefit of pain relievers with the dulling of mind that goes with the relief, the omnipresence of pain—always *there* intruding, slowing time and task down by its constant demand for attention, the loss of appetite and the drain of energy, the social narrowing that comes when those who love you lots join you in constantly focusing on your pain and how you're doing, and those who love you less find it too painful to be around you—and more besides. One week of such things breaks my heart for those whose suffering dwarfs mine—both in the depth and duration of their pain. Then, of course, there are other kinds of pain that visit people with similarly enervating and devastating consequence—loved ones claimed or maimed by war, children lost through violence or tragic accident, cataclysmic loss from unnatural disasters, marriages ripped apart by infidelity, and the list goes on.

So, what would God teach me through such a week? A relatively intense but brief time of pain convinces me that most of the time I live a charmed—or graced—life. Such as I *do* suffer, relative to others, reveals my outcries as often petty whining. My mini pains provide a huge reality check to note the maxi pains that are companion to so many. May the reality check produce both discerning sympathy for the hurting and unending gratitude for being spared so much. And just as I wished someone would *do* something, even though I knew I was in part asking for the impossible, so when others around me wish or pray out of their anguish, may I sometimes be someone who *does* something!

When you are in pain, you want relief, you want it to stop. The wanting or desiring comes front and center and perseveres until relief comes. I muse: do I want God, God's Spirit, God's blessing, God's will as much as *that*? I should, I want to, but *do* I? Am I as persistent in seeking until GOD-RELIEF comes?

It is impossible to escape all pain. And, it is inevitable that we will embrace some pain—especially if we are graced and empowered enough to live up to our God-designed destiny. I've been reminded that if we love God with our all and others as self—the very heart of our life in Christ and our movement as God's people—we regularly and even joyfully embrace pain. We embrace the pain of the broken hearted Father whose cherished son was missing. We embrace the anguish of the Savior-Shepherd whose heart

went out to the people—so many of them—who were harassed, confused, bruised, at the brink of disaster as sheep without a shepherd. We embrace the writhing of the Apostle moving in and out of contractions birthing Christ within and among the people of God. We embrace the crushing dread of the calamity about to sweep people away from their God and their rightful home—and we could wish to be crushed ourselves if only they would turn from catastrophe. And, we embrace the pain that comes as consequence of following the Lord as love of our lives. He *is* Life. To follow Him, to join Him is to be in the very center, moving toward fuller, more multi-dimensional life, whatever the cost. I would follow—whatever it means and however it feels—for the sake of even one more

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