

Martin's Malady

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For the past few weeks I haven't put pen to paper due to an on-going battle with kidney stones. What began as nagging, lower back pain last November ended up being two stones in my right kidney. The larger of the two was about the size of a golf ball. Over the past month I've gone through two rounds of lithotripsy and one ureteroscopy laser treatment. My mind has been foggier than usual due to pain medicine. I've drunk roughly the displacement value of the QE2. And I'm afraid the stones may still be winning.

I'll have to admit that when it comes to pain, I'm a pretty big baby. I want to be cared for (what man doesn't?). But perhaps more than care, I want to be understood. I want people to know that I'm not making it up, that what's happening to me really does hurt. I guess I'm after a bit of sympathy. So, during this recent bout with kidney stones, it has been some strange sense of comfort to me to know that Martin Luther suffered with them as well. We tend to idolize our heroes (Luther is certainly one of mine) and imagine they lived pain-free, care-free lives, but such is not the case, certainly not with Martin Luther. He suffered with a number of illnesses and discomforts in addition to kidney stones including insomnia, constipation, and depression. Since Luther lived in an era that lacked the comparative luxury of treating stones with lithotripsy or laser surgery, he used the old-time German remedy — beer! Lots and lots of beer!

If you've ever suffered with kidney stones, then you understand and can sympathize with Martin and me. If you haven't had to endure the pain they inflict, I hope you never do. Let me assure you that all the stories you've heard are true. But kidney stone sufferers are not in an elite club. We're not the only ones who really understand pain. Everyone suffers to one degree or another. I have my aches, pains, and ailments, and you have yours. You may suffer from back pain or arthritis. You may have heart disease or cancer. Some things are much worse than kidney stones. You may, however, not be able to

trace your ailment to a kidney, joint, or tumor. The source of your suffering may be a wayward child, trouble at church, or that ache of soul we call depression. All of us suffer in one way or another. Pain is part-and-parcel of life in this post-Genesis-three world we inhabit, and the sooner we come to grips with it biblically the better off we'll be.

The Bible has a lot to say about suffering. Remember the book of Job? What about 1 and 2 Peter? There are many passages we could investigate, but in the limited space I have here I want to briefly unpack a few simple lessons that we all tend to forget.

First, suffering has a purpose. I know this because of Romans 8:28 and Ephesians 1:11. God works everything according to his purpose and for our good. It's easy to throw Romans 8:28 at a sufferer in a glib, unfeeling way. Please don't ever do that. Romans 8:28 is spoken most powerfully when it's said through tears. Use Romans 8:28 with compassion and never let go of its truth. God is working everything together for good for those who love him.

That leads me to remind us both that God is good, even when we suffer. I know God is good. The psalms echo this truth several times. "Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him" (Ps. 34:8; cf. 100:5; 135:3; 145:9)! The Lord may take you to an operating room, the ICU, or a martyr's grave, but he will still be good. And every step of the way he will show you his goodness.

Remember also that no matter what you're going through, Jesus understands. He understands day-to-day suffering, the pains that wear us down and discourage us. He knows what suffering is all about. How do we know that Jesus understands? We know because he is one with us biologically. The incarnation means nothing less than Christ joining us in true, weak, fallen, sin-cursed humanity (John 1:14). Of course Jesus was never a sinner; he never disobeyed the law of God (2 Cor. 5:21). But the humanity he partook of is our humanity, the humanity that suffers under all of the brokenness

introduced by the Fall. I don't know if Jesus ever had kidney stones, but I know he understands what it means to live in the weakness and pain of a real human body.

That Christ understands means we must ultimately take all of our suffering (physical, mental, spiritual) to the foot of the cross. It's at the cross that we get the best perspective on pain. Christ suffered for us, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God (1 Pet. 3:18). Golgotha was the pinnacle of pain as the Lord Jesus bore not only the horror of crucifixion but the weight of our guilt. Pain and suffering give us a small taste of what Jesus did for us. The next time you hurt, think about how much greater the pain was that Christ suffered in order to save you. He wants you and me to think about it. It will help us understand, and it will increase our gratitude.

Finally, remember that no matter what we face, God will give us the grace to endure. Paul prayed three times for the Lord to remove his "thorn in the flesh." He begged, "Please, Lord. No more pain." But God said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Instead of removing the pain, God poured in his grace. That led Paul to respond, "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (2 Cor. 12:9). Here's the Lord's formula: Pain leads us to prayer, prayer unleashes God's grace in our lives, the power of Christ rests upon us, we endure through his grace, and he gets the glory.

If kidney stones get me in touch with God, grace, and glory, then praise the Lord for kidney stones!