

On Tears

by Mike Tucker *

A small article toward the back of a *People* magazine told the story of Ashlyn. She is an incredibly happy child, very eager and energetic. According to her mother, Ashlyn has the best laugh in the world, and according to her kindergarten teacher, she fearlessly goes headfirst into everything. In many ways she is a typical, lovable five year-old. But Ashlyn is one of only 50 people in the world with a genetic condition that leaves her unable to feel pain. She can feel touch and be tickled, but she cannot sense pain or extreme temperatures.

Pain is there for a reason. When Ashlyn was a toddler, her parents had to wrap her with athletic tape because of all the damage she was causing to her limbs. She has knocked eight teeth out and dug a hole in her eye without shedding a tear. She once came in from outside proclaiming she couldn't get the dirt off her skin. But it wasn't dirt. Ashlyn was covered with hundreds of fire ants.

Pain is necessary. Imagine not knowing when you have scalded your mouth on a hot meal or bit your tongue so badly that it bled. Imagine your child reaching out for the light of a candle and not having the pain of burned fingers to reinforce your scolding plea not to play with fire.

In our times of greatest pain we often ask why a loving God would allow it in the first place. And yet, the closing lines of Ashlyn's story were the words of her parent: "I would give anything, absolutely anything, for Ashlyn to feel pain."

Pain is the body's signal for danger, however slight or severe. It is a force for navigating unknown corridors of life, without which we find ourselves numb to reality, robbed of caution, and disoriented to the world. "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pain," says C.S. Lewis.

We are comforted by the image of heaven as the place where God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. There is great hope in the promise that there will one day "be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Revelation 21:4). But perhaps there is also something wonderful about a God who gives us pain.

To God the psalmist says, "You have kept count of my tossings, put my tears in your bottle" (Psalm 56:8, ESV). Tear-bottles were small urns of glass or pottery, created to

collect the tears of mourners at the funeral of a loved one and placed in the sepulchers at Rome and in Palestine where bodies were laid to rest. In some ancient tombs these bottles are found in great numbers, collecting tears that were shed with great meaning.

Perhaps equally as comforting as knowing God will one day wipe away every tear from our eyes is the thought that God does not see our pain here as a pointless or empty occurrence. The psalmist reminds us that our tears on earth do not go unnoticed. God has kept count of our sorrowful struggling; each tear is recorded as pain steeped with meaning. Like a parent grieving at a child's wound, God reaches out to you in—perhaps even through—your pain, speaking gently into your heightened sense of awareness. And with the Son who wept at the grave of Lazarus, God collects your tears in his bottle until the day when tears will be no more.

With love,
Mike

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