No pain, no gain

Lady Jane Seymore Fonda is an American actress, writer, political activist, and former fashion mode. But perhaps she is best known for her aerobic videos. Dressed in her leotard and leg warmers she would encourage her viewers to keep working out past the point of muscle soreness and fatigue by saying, “no pain, no gain”.

With these words Miss Jane was echoing the wisdom of the ages. In the beginning of the second century, Rabbi Ben Hei said, "According to me, the pain is the gain." In the first century poet Robert Herrick wrote a two line poem that said, "If little labor, little are our gains: Man's fate is according to his pains". What this fitness guru, teacher, and poet understand is valuable things; benefits, and rewards often come as a result of enduring hurt, discomfort, and suffering. No pain, no gain.

Athletes like those who attended our soccer camp this weekend know the wisdom of these words. They have endured the pain of skills training so that they can gain ability in playing soccer. I am looking forward to the scrimmage after worship where they will demonstrate the gain of their pain.

But first it would be great if we could apply Ms. Fonda’s wisdom to our lives as Christians. Christians experience pain. I know, not exactly a shock to you is it. You live in the same world that I do. You know that painful things happen to Christians. I just repeat it because I think that the devil wants us to forget. The devil wants us to believe that pain is not part of the Christian’s life. Because then when you experience pain you start to question whether or not you are really a Christian. Or you start to blame God who failed to take away all your pain and you say, “What is the point of this Christianity if I cannot escape the pain of this world?” But God never promised Christians a life without pain. Jesus tells us in John 16:33, “In this world you will have trouble.” You will have pain.

But if the devil can get us to forget that it is natural/ normal for Christians to experience pain then when pain comes into our lives we think something is wrong. That’s why I want to take a few moments this morning applying Ms. Fonda’s wisdom to our lives as Christians. No pain, no gain.

1 Peter 1:3-9 is part of a letter that is written to people in pain. As this letter is written, the Christian church is entering into one of the worst periods of persecution it has ever seen. At the hands of Nero Christians were tortured and killed. The Historian Tacitus tells us, “in their very deaths they were made the subjects of sport: for they were covered with the hides of wild beasts, and worried to death by dogs, or nailed to crosses, or set fire to, and when the day waned, burned to serve for the evening lights.”

Peter wants Christians to understand why there was/is pain in their/our lives. He begins by first reminding them/us that we are Christians. “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” We talked about this at our Soccer camp on Friday. By nature we are all sinful unbelievers. We were born sinners and we do sinful things. Romans 8:7 tells us, “the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so.” As unbelievers we were shooting at the wrong goal. No matter how hard we tried no matter how much better we were then all the other players on the field, as long as we were shooting at the wrong goal we were never going to win the game. Thankfully The Holy Spirit grabbed hold of us either at our baptism or through the preaching of the bible and turned us around to face the right goal. A little later in his letter Peter wrote, “Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

Saint Peter is reminding us that we have reason to praise God because in his mercy, He made us part of Jesus’ team; we are Christians.

The reason Peter starts by reminding us that we are Christians is because the purpose of pain in the life of a Christian is different than pain in the life of an unbeliever. The devil wants us to view the pain that enters our life as punishment from an angry unloving God. But Hebrews 12:7 reminds us that couldn’t be farther from the truth, “Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?”

That is why in verses 6-7 Peter writes, “In this you greatly rejoice, now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. 7 These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor...”

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1 1 Pe 2:10
when Jesus Christ is revealed.”  Peter says in our pain we “greatly rejoice”.  To make sense of how a person can greatly rejoice when pain enters their life Peter uses an illustration of a refining fire.  Gold is subjected to 1100 degrees Fahrenheit to burn off impurities that taint gold and reduce its value.  Obviously in this illustration you are the gold.  You are the thing of value that God is refining.  God uses the pain that comes into your life to strengthen your faith and to burn off harmful distractions to your goal on this earth and in eternity.  No pain, no gain.

For example, who among us would not like to gain wisdom and compassion, gratitude and humility?  Well, think about how wisdom is gained.  Wisdom often comes from knowing what will not work.  Wisdom comes from failures and frustrations, trial and error.  Through pain wisdom is gained.  And what about Compassion, how is compassion gained?  Naturally our concern is for our own comfort.  But when God allows us to experience the pain of being cold or hungry or abandoned we gain compassion for others when they are suffering as we have once suffered.  Through pain compassion is gained.  And what about gratitude, how is gratitude gained?  Tragically we don’t know what we’ve got till it’s gone.  When a storm knocks the cable out during a football game, or the AC fails in mid June, or a child gets sick, or an adult loses a job, or a loved one is lost we tend to be more grateful for our comforts, necessities, and blessings.  Often only after painful loss is gratitude gained.  And what about humility, how is humility gained?  Naturally we are full of pride and arrogance.  But when God allows us to experience painful humiliation do we not gain humility?  We could keep going but I think we understand the point - no pain, no gain.

God wants gain for us here and now and so God allows us to experience some pain.  The prophet Isaiah understood why God allowed pain to enter into his life.  In Isaiah 38:17 we read, “Surely it was for my benefit that I suffered such anguish.  In your love you kept me from the pit of destruction.”  The psalmist understood why God allowed pain into his life.  In Psalm 119:71, we read, “It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.”  Saint James understood why God allowed pain into his life.  In James 1:2-4 we read, “2 Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.  4 Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”  Imprisoned Paul understood why God allowed pain to enter into his life.  In Romans 5:3-4 we read, “we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; 4 perseverance, character; and character, hope.”  Once we understand, as the prophets and apostles did, that God allows pain to enter into our lives for our gain we are able to make sense of how we are able to greatly rejoice when pain enters our life.  We appreciate Ms. Fonda’s wisdom and apply No pain, no gain to our lives as Christians.

But God is not content to leave us with only earthly gain.  God is not content to fill us with great joy.  God wants to bring us into eternal gain.  God wants us to be filled with what Peter describes at the end of verse 8 as “an inexpressible and glorious joy”  God’s goal is the salvation of your soul.  The problem was, there is no amount of pain we can endure to achieve that gain.  We cannot suffer badly enough or long enough to pay for even one sin we have committed against God.  The first half of Romans 6:23 tells us, “For the wages of sin is death.  No amount of our pain could achieve heavenly gain.

But in verse 9 Peter does not tell us we are achieving the goal of our faith.  He writes, “you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”  In Jesus God found a way to give us heavenly gain.  The second half of Romans 6:23 tells us, “but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”  Jesus came to live among us in this sinful world full of pain.  He suffered in place of us the pain of the cross.  He endured for us the pain of hell.  Isaiah 53:5, says it beautifully, "But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed."  Because of Jesus’ pain we have eternal gain.

Greatly rejoice, you who are suffering!  God has allowed pain to enter into your life to give you earthly gain.  Be filled with inexpressible and glorious joy, you who are saddened!  Jesus has endured the pain of the cross to give you eternal gain.  It turns out Ms. Fonda’s was right when she said, no pain, no gain.  Amen

1 Peter 1:3-9  Soccer Camp Sunday June 23rd 2013  Pastor Harmon Lewis @ Saving Grace Lutheran Church, Mobile, AL