

Jesus never promised to relieve our pain

Faith doesn't take away our suffering. It promises we're not alone.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [January 31, 2018](#) issue



Thinkstock

Pain is the attention-getting gift that nobody wants. Its signals and sensations alert us to unwelcome events or situations. Pain “plunges like a sword through creation,” writes Evelyn Underhill, suggesting that a certain amount of distress or discomfort is an unavoidable reality for all of us.

Although we may aim to give pain no more power than it deserves, it always engenders some kind of response. If we’re not paralyzed by pain, we’re usually motivated to do something about it. This could mean a trip to the local pain clinic, which more properly might be called a pain *management* clinic, since medical professionals neither aspire to create pain nor always succeed in eliminating it. Opioid medications go a long way toward managing acute pain, though they’re far less effective in treating chronic pain. In fact, long-term use fosters a craving that

converts easily into addiction and even overdose. Because opioids exert their influence in certain reward regions of the brain that allow us to perceive pleasure and well-being, they end up producing both analgesic and euphoric effects.

Fighting opioid addiction is an important battle to wage on several fronts, including those of public policy and public funding (see [our editorial in this issue](#)). New strategies for limiting “doctor shopping” and enhancing state and federal electronic databases would go a long way toward controlling access to these popular painkillers.

But not all opioid addicts begin their journey in search of relief from physical pain. There is recreational use, too, typically triggered by a quest for intense feelings of well-being and happiness. When narcotics get used for euphoric reasons, it’s safe to assume that something is missing in the user’s life. It may be the absence of deep friendships, insufficient moral guides, a faltering sense of purpose or integrity, or a feeling that life is just not adding up to significance. Many addicts are running from internal pain and suffering that is anything but physical in nature.

Religion offers a helpful response here, though not in the way Karl Marx supposed. When Marx called religion the “opium of the people,” he understood it to function like opium in an injured person: it reduced a sense of suffering and offered pleasurable illusions. But the Christian faith proposes just the opposite. Jesus never operated as the great palliative. There’s no evidence of him pretending to be a pain reliever who showed up on earth to eliminate all suffering. In fact, he promised a cross for every one of his followers. Disciples who believed they would escape pain or misery by loving or obeying him were only fooling themselves.

Christians are supposed to be experts on suffering, says Eugene Peterson, for one chief reason alone: their identifying symbol is the cross. People of faith who spend their lives steeped in the cross know, because of the one upon it, of a companion in their every pain. While it’s true that some people become more resilient through suffering, and other people become more embittered through very similar suffering, it’s hard for any of us to conceive of a life without suffering. The Christian faith does not remove agony and ordeal from life.

We may aim for happiness and pleasure on many days, and these are not entirely frivolous pursuits. But we’d be wise to recognize that our lives are formed most fully through our suffering.

*A version of this article appears in the January 31 print edition under the title
"Companion in our pain."*