

The Problem of Pain

The Apostle Paul repeatedly defended the credibility of his ministry against the insinuations and attacks of his enemies, the false “super apostles,” who boasted of their impressive and concocted credentials. These “super apostles” taught that spirituality was accompanied by human power and ostensible success; whereas suffering and hardship were signs of spiritual weakness. In response, Paul said rather than boasting in what he had accomplished as an apostle, he was determined to boast about his troubles and suffering, in which the power of God is revealed.

Our New Testament scripture contains the famous statement of Paul about his experience of ecstasy, in which he was caught up into paradise, and his subsequent experience of being given a “thorn in his flesh.” In typical rabbinical style, Paul uses the third person, even though he is describing his personal experience:

It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. ² I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. ³ And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows—⁴ was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. ⁵ On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. ⁶ But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, ⁷ even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. ⁸ Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, ⁹ but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. ¹⁰ Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

The Apostle Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, faces head-on the problem of pain. His testimony is an honest confession of his own weakness, and acceptance of the fact that God permits pain as part of his purpose in our lives to draw us into a deeper experience of his grace.

Perhaps all of us have had experiences in our lives, when great pain and suffering seemed to hide the face of God, and contradicted all we were taught about his love, and the way he faithfully answers our prayers. And sometimes our greatest suffering is not directly ours, but is the distress and grief we may experience because of the suffering of a friend, parent, child or spouse.

Contrary to the false teaching of the “name-it-and-claim-it” theology of Paul’s enemies, the “super apostles,” or of the faith healing evangelists of today’s world, the truth is that we as believers, even the best of believers, face the problem of pain, which is an unwelcome intruder. Paul never shies away from the subject of pain and suffering. In fact, the entire Bible doesn’t shirk from broaching the subject. But neither does Scripture solve the problem of evil for us. The Book of Job is a witness that suffering will remain an unsolved mystery until we receive greater insight than Job’s “miserable comforters” were able to offer. The full understanding of why God permits pain, evil and suffering no doubt awaits our future life in the kingdom, when we will no longer have to see the “poor reflection as in a mirror” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

After our original paradise and perfect relationship with God was lost, he has allowed suffering and pain to bring us back to him and to teach us to rely on his grace. CS Lewis called suffering “God’s megaphone.” We might today call pain “God’s amplifier.” Pain seems to come to us as a track to take us deeper into the grace of God, to prepare us for greater living and serving.

Paul’s experience of his painful thorn came after his experience of ecstasy in which he was caught up into paradise, which is now the intermediate place where Jesus dwells with those departed children of his. The best we can calculate, this thorn came to him after this ecstatic experience that took place when Paul was preparing, in virtual isolation, for his public ministry. This experience he relates in our text was such an overwhelmingly blessed experience he did not feel at liberty to share the details. God gave Paul an incredible worship experience in order to prepare him for a time of suffering and pain.

The Lord knows our spiritual needs, and in order to enable us to have the strength we need to obey and serve him, he sometimes gives us great times of mountaintop worship experiences. Personal and corporate worship is designed to glorify God, and as we do so, he lifts our hearts and refreshes our spirits. Sometimes holy God breaks through our worship routines and surprises us with an extraordinary visitation of his Spirit. The irony is that we are so blessed, not when we seek to be emotionally satisfied, but rather when we seek Jesus, and to focus on him and his glorious presence. These extraordinarily satisfying and uplifting experiences are not available to us on command. They are his gracious gifts. They are divine serendipities. For me, these mountaintop breakthroughs occasionally come in the midst of ministry. At times, when emerging from a hospital room after prayer with someone in crisis, or upon sharing the assurance of grace with a troubled soul, I find myself on a mountaintop.

Often when we have these great mountaintop experiences they are interrupted or followed by that unwelcome intruder we call the “valley of need” or even of difficulty, disappointment and *pain*. Perhaps what Jesus taught his first disciples

and is teaching us is that we take the mountaintop of a fresh and vital experience of worship with us each day. By the indwelling Holy Spirit, whose presence is new to us with each experience of personal and corporate worship, we can take the mountaintop with us into the daily valleys of service, need and even pain. Similarly, Paul's being caught up to paradise was an important time for him. Paul needed an extra measure of divine encouragement before he would experience the painful ordeal, the unwelcome intruder, his "thorn in the flesh."

We don't know exactly the nature of Paul's thorn in his flesh. Theories abound, such as physical ailments from malaria, eye disease, convulsions and epilepsy; psychological-spiritual factors offered are fits of regret and depression over his past of persecuting the church. A credible theory that resonates with my experience is the one that posits that Paul's thorn was his main nemesis and detractor in the churches, perhaps a member of the church in Corinth. This theory would make Paul's thorn the "angelos", messenger of Satan who led all the "super apostles" in resisting Paul's leadership, and in consistently denigrating his motives.

The truth is, we don't know what the thorn was, but that it was an affliction that assailed Paul, and no doubt it was a distraction to him in his work. Yet his thorn did not keep him from traversing the Roman Empire as the great apostle and missionary of the church. It's good we don't know the exact identity of the thorn so we can supply the specificity to our own situation. I know what well enough what my thorns have been, and you probably can identify yours too. Our thorn is the source of our pain and distress. It's a condition or a person beyond our control that we would gladly eliminate had we the power or opportunity.

The pain of Paul's thorn was severe enough to drive him to his knees on three separate occasions. I think Paul likely engaged in three seasons of intense prayer in which he truly and desperately sought the Lord to remove this affliction from him. Theologian J.I. Packer offers that Paul had to go to the Lord on three separate occasions because he no doubt met this thorn with a resistant spirit at first. Packer says it probably sparked thoughts of resentment toward God, pity for himself, and thoughts of despair about the future of his ministry—"the sort of thoughts that Satan specializes in stirring up within us all." Years ago, after the abrupt termination of a 19-year-long ministry, I battled thoughts of resentment, self-pity, and despair about the future. Nancy's dreadful disease also has brought an onslaught of doubt, despair, fear, and even anger towards God.

Pain and suffering await or currently engage us. Sovereign God allows Satan to send his messenger to draw us deeper into his grace. Even after his seasons of prayer to the contrary, Paul's thorn remained. The answer from the Lord was probably not the one Paul desired. The answer God gave was that the pain would remain, but that grace would make him equal to the challenge.

Grace is the unmerited favor of God in our behalf. We think of grace primarily in terms of our salvation, yet grace is God's continuing activity and provision in our lives. God's grace can even be defined as God himself. God wants us to come to the place in our lives when we realize he is all we really need. He is the source of our strength, and even our riches and joy. If we have him, we have his grace. And his grace is sufficient.

Our Lord Jesus himself knew suffering as no other person. The writer of *Hebrews* says that Jesus learned obedience through the things he suffered (5:8). Jesus was never disobedient to the Father. But it was necessary for him to obediently fulfill the will of the Father. And the Father's will culminated in the cross. Jesus' greatest struggle of will took place in the Garden of Gethsemane, the night he was betrayed and arrested for his crucifixion. He knew that his death on the cross would be one of ineffable agony as the bearer of the sins of the world. In that awareness he cried three times that if atonement could be provided any other way, then might the cup of this suffering pass from him. The dreadful, thunderous answer was there was no other way for him but the cross. And the Savior's own grace enabled him to pray in surrender to the Father, "not as I will, but your will be done" (Matthew 26:39).

The Message paraphrases verses 7-8 of our text as, "Satan's angel did his best to get me down; what he in fact did was push me to my knees." Pain passes into the eternal purposes of God for us when it drives us deeper into God's love and grace. We cannot escape pain any more than could our Lord Jesus and his servant Paul. Pain is reality. Believers are not spared the normal ailments and tragedies of human life that belong to the community of mankind. There are, of course, pains and ailments that are produced or at least permitted by our carelessness or poor choices. As followers of Jesus, we also enter the arena of conflict with Satan and his minions. There is suffering from cross-bearing discipleship.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus came to realize there could be no redemption apart from the cross. There must be a cross for us, that because Jesus suffered we too must suffer. We realize that we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22). With the first disciples, we are summoned to take up our cross and follow Jesus, in the words of Bonhoeffer, we are called to "come and die." The cross, our cross, is essential for our redemption and the way of the cross, our cross, is essential for our living and serving as authentic witnesses and followers of Jesus.

However pain and suffering come, we can trust God is at work through all that happens, both for our temporal good and his eternal glory (Romans 8:28). Numerous psalms have to do with pain and suffering. They are songs of praise to the God who oftentimes hides his smiling face behind a frowning providence, in the words of William Cowper.

President Obama quoted Cowper in his eulogy for the Hon. Rev. Clementa Pinckney, one of the nine who were slain in the recent prayer service in Charleston, saying "God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform." The President noted that God turned what was an unspeakable atrocity into an occasion to demonstrate to the world the power of his amazing grace. Our President's prayer is that out of this atrocity and national suffering we as a nation will be drawn deeper into God's amazing grace that abounded in that church sanctuary.

God is at work in our pain to draw us closer to his grace, and to teach us to rely absolutely upon him. Paul came to be satisfied with the results of his pain, which was the resting of the power of God upon his life. He came to realize that the power of God shone through him more clearly in his pain than through his personal power and capability. He said he refused to get into a boasting contest with his enemies, who were quite proud of their oratorical achievements. He wanted rather to boast of his weakness because in his need God came to his rescue. When he was weak in himself God became strong within him (verse 10).

None of us likes a feeling of helplessness or pain. I'm no masochist for sure. Yet I haven't been able to avoid it. Pain is a fact of the believer's life. I pray with you that God will give us the assurance that his grace is sufficient to enable us to endure it faithfully. He will allow us to use our suffering redemptively as his presence, power and peace show up obviously and victoriously in our lives as his faithful people.

What's your thorn? Physical pain? Emotional? Grief over death of a loved one? Over a broken relationship? Unjust criticism? Guilt (real or imagined)? Fear of the unknown? Disappointment over life itself? Disappointment with God? Take it to God. His grace is his gift to you.