

Finding Grace in Suffering

The Life and Ministry of Paul—part 4

July 17, 2016

DAY 1: Facing suffering: Groan inwardly; Wait eagerly

1. We live in a world where a number of well-known preachers preach a Christianity that implies that if you experience pain and suffering, something is wrong with your faith. A study of the life of Paul should be sufficient evidence to call that teaching, “baloney!”

2. Pain doesn’t just come from our own foolish decisions. Sometimes Satan inflicts it and sometimes God allows or even brings pain into our lives for his redemptive purposes in our lives!

Romans 8:22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

3. Ever since the sin of Adam, mankind has lived in a fallen world. It is not the same perfect world God created. Man’s sin introduced evil into our world.

4. Paul tells us that the whole creation has been groaning. In one way, the creation groans in this way: earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, illness, diseases, etc.

5. Paul adds another layer of groaning: human groaning.

Romans 8:23 Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

6. There is not just something wrong with the world. There is also something wrong with human nature.

a. We are not what we should be.

b. Relationships are not what they should be.

c. Our relationship with God is not what it should be.

7. The difference between what is and what could be is that over which we groan.

8. But all is not gloom and doom. Paul adds something very important to groaning! He says we “wait eagerly.” For what do we “wait eagerly?” _____

9. We wait eagerly for the day when the shortcomings of our human nature, the disappointments in life, will one day finally be over!

10. What strikes you from today’s verses?

DAY 2: 2 Corinthians! Auto-biographical insight into Paul's soul

2 Corinthians 1:3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort,

⁴ who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

1. For what reasons does Paul give praise to God?

2 Corinthians 1:5 For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.

⁶ If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer.

⁷ And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

2. For what other reasons does Paul see the hand of God through suffering?

3. If you've had a miscarriage, lost a child, been out of work too long, gone through a painful divorce, gotten the dreaded biopsy report you understand what Paul is saying. It is likely that you have had opportunities to comfort others through your own pain.

2 Cor. 1:8 We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life.

4. Sometimes Christians think they should not talk about their pain because verbalizing it somehow "makes God look bad" or means we're not "trusting God" enough. What do you think Paul would think about that belief?

5. The irony is that when we admit the pain and disappointments we feel in life, it drives us to God!

2 Cor. 1:9 Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.

6. What struck you from Paul's testimony about suffering?

DAY 3: How we are to think about suffering

2 Corinthians 6:4 Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses;

⁵ in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger;

1. As we've seen Paul was extremely honest about the difficulties of life. He not only acknowledged the difficulties, but he put words to it, AND made it known to others. Does that affect how you think about your own suffering?

2. We usually think in either-or categories, rather than both-and categories. For example, we think that either we're trusting God or we're in pain. Either we're trusting God or we're struggling with doubt. Oftentimes, both are occurring simultaneously!

2 Cor. 6: ... in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; ⁷ in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left;

*⁸ through glory **and** dishonor, bad report **and** good report; genuine, **yet** regarded as impostors;*

*⁹ known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, **and** yet not killed;*

*¹⁰ **sorrowful, yet always rejoicing**; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.*

3. What strikes you about the “ands” and “yets” in this passage?

4. Are there any of the phrases in today's verses that resonate with you at this time in your life? Jot down the one that resonates the most.

5. How does the idea of “and” or “yet” change how you should think about dealing with hardship in your life?

6. Talk to God about your own “ands” and “yets.”

DAY 4: Paul's Thorn in the Flesh

2 Corinthians 12:1 I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord.

² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know--God knows.

³ And I know that this man--whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows--

⁴ was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell.

1. We come to an unusual passage of scripture. Paul, I believe, is writing about himself in the third person. He is giving a testimony of his own experience.
2. As you read this testimony there are some things Paul doesn't know about this experience and thus, some things we don't know.
3. What are the things of which Paul is sure?
4. What are the things of which Paul is not sure?
5. Now, let's say that happened to YOU yesterday. You come to church today. What would you be tempted to do with that experience?
6. There is no sin so delectable as pride. **What was God's response** to giving this vision to Paul?
2 Corinthians 12:7 To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.
7. We don't know what the thorn was. Bible scholars can only speculate: physical ailment; eye disease; persecution; enemies; epilepsy; migraines.
8. Paul simply called it a "*messenger of Satan.*" Satan used it in hopes of discouraging Paul, while God used it to keep Paul humble.
9. As you think about your own life, does today's devotional shed any light for you?

DAY 5: Grace Sufficient for You

2 Corinthians 12:8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.

1. What was Paul's response to the thorn?

2 Corinthians 12:9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness...."

2. While God could have taken this thorn in the flesh away in answer to prayer, what was God's answer to Paul's prayer?

3. Put the Lord's response in your own words:

4. After hearing God's response, Paul draws a conclusion, and commits himself to a course of attitude...

2 Cor. 12:9b Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

¹⁰ That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

5. This flies right in the face of how we "naturally" think. We falsely believe and live as if life's highest priority is our happiness, and God's highest responsibility is to provide relief.

6. God has a higher priority for us than our comfort. It is to walk with Him, know Him, and reflect Him to others through our pain and suffering, or more exactly, in spite of our pain and suffering!

7. What is your response to today's verses?