

"Pain's Purpose, Part II" (2 Corinthians 12:1-10)

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Proposition: There are beneficial reasons to why we suffer.

Introduction:

TNIV 2 Corinthians 12:1-10 ¹I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. ²I 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. ³And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—⁴was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell. ⁵I will boast about someone like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. ⁶Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, ⁷or because of these surpassingly great revelations. Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. ¹⁰That 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.

What do you think is the number one question asked by people who go through suffering? I think it's the question, "WHY?" "God, why did you have to take her away so early?" "God, why did you let this happen?" "Why is this suffering happening to me?"

It's a fair question. And the good news is that there is an answer. The bible never questions the reality of evil in this world or the presence of suffering in people's lives. It assumes the world is a broken and painful place. It assumes the reality of suffering related to sickness which can lead to death. And it assumes the reality of people and systems that are evil and would want to cause you harm. It even assumes that people are such that they would inflict suffering upon themselves. This is the world we live. The Christian worldview doesn't deny such a world. It assumes it, and in such a world it offers a solution.

Sometimes, for reasons we do not know, God doesn't answer the 'Why' question, and we may have to wait until we go to heaven to understand the reason behind certain events.

But the Bible is not completely silent. In fact there are several reasons the Bible states for why suffering occurs. Knowing these truths will us brave through the trials that come our way.

We suffer so we can comfort those who suffer.

2 Cor 1: 3-4 ³Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ⁴who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.

When we go through suffering and we allow God and the church community to come to our aid, it becomes a powerful healing agent in our lives. Sometimes God will remove the pain and sometimes he won't, but he promises comfort. God promises he will be there throughout all of our struggles.

Psalm 23:4 *⁴Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*

God promises that he will never leave us nor forsake us. Jesus says he is with us always to the very end of the age. And the presence of God, the presence of Jesus allows us to receive the comfort we need.

Paul writes what he writes here because the truth of the matter is that the only thing that can bring true comfort is God and other people. Isn't that amazing? It isn't drugs or surgery or the removal of pain. Sure those things will help some of the time. But whatever our suffering what we truly need is the presence of God and the presence of people who love us dearly.

And then when a person who's gone through suffering and in turn has received copious amounts of grace and comfort from God and others, that person can now become a great comforter to others. Because you've been there...because you've experienced it first hand...because you are now familiar with loss and with sorrow. You know what to say and not to say to those going through similar circumstances. You know what to do and not to do in their presence.

It was when my mother passed away and after all the funeral stuff was over in Chicago, we returned back to Young Nak and the church thought the right thing to do was to have a memorial service so that Young Nak folks could grieve with Linda and me. And as the service was ending we got up front and the guests got in a line to greet us, and one woman she just said to me with eyes full of sympathy, "Pastor, I don't know what to say at a time like this.", she held my hand and walked by. Christ's love was shown to me so tangibly at that moment. At that time I had only been at Young Nak just under 3 years, but it was after that memorial service, that I knew this was home, this was my family, this was my community.

This comfort that I received, as I thought about the healing it had upon my heart, I realized that this is how I can comfort someone later. Because I went through the suffering of losing my mother, there have been many times I have been able to better comfort those who are going through an ailing parent or the loss of a loved one.

For every single one of us the same is possible. You can use your history to bless someone's future.

And the procedure basically goes like this.

Suffer, Receive Gods' comfort, go and comfort others

Suffering allows us to know Christ more deeply

Philippians 3:10-11 *¹⁰I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.*

This is perhaps one of the most neglected truths regarding suffering. When we think of suffering, sure we think of what God might be teaching us and we may even consider how God might be disciplining us. But for most Christians, suffering in order to know Christ better, may not even come to mind. Remember, Jesus said that eternal life is to know God. Eternal life is a relationship. And to know Christ, is to know God. That's the essence of our lives—to be in a relationship with God that is growing in intimacy. And one of the ways that relationship grows is through suffering.

The apostle Paul wants to know Christ so intimately. He wants to do whatever it takes. He will stop at no expense. All he is concerned about is to know Christ more...even if it means suffering.

In fact to know Christ very personally, is to know very personally, the power of his resurrection, that is available in Christians today; and sharing in the sufferings of Christ.

The bishop Polycarp who lived in the 2nd Century was known to be a disciple of the apostle John. Well, he had been arrested as a Christian leader and was lead away to be executed. As he was brought into the arena to be killed, the proconsul tried to persuade him to recant his faith in Christ. He resisted and again the Proconsul urged him and said, "Swear, and I will release thee; curse the Christ." And Polycarp said, "Eighty and six years have I served him, and he hath done me no wrong; how then can I blaspheme my king who saved me?" Well he was executed by being burned at the stake.

In Polycarp's suffering and persuction he had such an intimate and personal relationship with Christ. Christ's love for him was unquestioned. His love for Christ was reaffirmed during this last trial before his death.

Christians, embrace suffering as a chance to know Christ. Luke records the account of the disciples in Acts after being persecuted.

Acts 5:41 ⁴¹*The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.*

Suffering for Jesus and suffering to know Jesus—that's one of the purposes to our pain.

Suffering is needed to finish the ministry of the church.

Colossians 1:24 *Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. The goal of the church is one, but it can be stated in different ways.*

Matthew 28:19 *Therefore go and make disciples of all nations,*

Matthew 24:14 *And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.*

Colossians 1:28 *We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.*

God's goal is to see his church established on planet earth. His goal is to see that every nation, every people group has had the opportunity to hear the gospel. Yet this will not happen apart from the suffering of the saints.

This verse is not stating that what Christ did on the cross was lacking or insufficient. It was finished. It perfectly purchased and secured our salvation. In one sense the suffering quota was met by Christ, but there is another quota that must be completed by his people. The suffering quota met by Christ was to ensure the salvation of all people for all time. But the suffering quota that is to be met by his people is for the expansion of the church until the return of Christ.

It has and will continue to cost many lives to see the world reached for Christ. How do I know that? Well, because the Bible teaches that. Look at Revelation 6:11.

Revelation 6:11 *Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants and brothers and sisters were killed just as they had been.*

So...suffering for God is good suffering. Suffering for the church is good suffering. Suffering for missions is good suffering.

Suffering forces all of us to lean really hard on God.

In the passage we read today we see Paul, one of, if not the greatest Christians to ever live, to speak of some of his spiritual experiences. Yet, while having this great resume of experiences w/ God, the Christians at Corinth, the Christians that were converted because of him, began to doubt his credibility. There were these false teachers going around falsely claiming many experiences which apparently were undermining the credibility of Paul. Well, in a very sarcastic way, Paul refutes the false teachers and gives the Corinthian Christians a harsh lesson by stating all of his accomplishments. Just as these false teachers boasted in their accomplishments, Paul states his apostolic, or Christ given authority by stating his own accomplishments. However, his accomplishments were not the great victory stories that people love to hear, on the other hand it was a testimony of all the sufferings he endured for Christ.

He goes on, speaking of an experience where he was taken up into heaven to see and experience things so great that he is not allowed to even mention them. Even though he's had experiences such as these, still he chooses to boast in weaknesses. He says it in 11:30; 12:5,9 that he will only boast in weaknesses and we see here, why.

Suffering keeps us from becoming prideful and keeps us relying on God.

His heavenly experience was so spectacular that God allowed Satan to put a thorn in his side to keep Paul humble. What this thorn was, no one knows, but painful enough that he cried out and pleaded for God to take it away. However God decided not to take the pain away. Instead God gave him the grace to endure through it.

There will be times in our lives that our weaknesses will be exposed whether we want them to be or not. Especially with age when we become frail and weak. But it may be before that. It may

being laid off from work. Or failing in a relationship. Or having to take a pay cut. Maybe dreams that never come to pass. Perhaps sickness, Or some unforeseen event occurs and its like someone pulled out the pin than held our life together. Definitely persecution. We don't know what it will be. But one thing we can be sure of is this.

God will give us sufficient grace, sufficient power and strength to get through it. The pain or trial, whatever we want to call it, it may remain, but God's grace will be there to sustain us.

So it is good for us to realize that sometimes it is God's will for us to remain in sickness or to suffer through difficult circumstances. There is no need to think that God desires for every Christian to be healthy and wealthy all of time or that God will answer every prayer in the way we desire. Even Christ himself was denied.

We must become people who are aware of our weaknesses so that the power of Christ may rest on us.

If we feel that we are lacking a sense of the power of Christ in our lives...Power to overcome sin and temptation...Power to live as a witness for him...Power to view the daily routine as opportunities to serve Christ. It may be because we are being too self-sufficient. Perhaps we don't realize the power and strength that is available to us. It's there and it is best experienced when we are at our weakest.

That's why we must work at recognizing our weaknesses and maintaining an attitude of humility before Christ. Because it is so natural for us to be independent, and self sufficient, we have to work at the opposite. We must pray as Jonathan Edwards did. "Lord, make me lower than the dust."

Folks, the work of God doesn't remain unfinished because there aren't enough talented and able bodied believers. No. On the contrary, the work of God isn't done because there are not enough people who are completely dependent upon him. The work of God must be done through people, who so deeply recognize their own inability and shortcoming and failures and impotence, yet they at the same time realize that their God is amazingly powerful.

It is only when we recognize that we are weak, that Christ will give us power. God humbles the proud, but gives grace to the humble. And as Paul says here, "When I am weak, I am strong."

One suffering Christian explained it like this. The sufferings I went through forced me to lean really hard on Jesus, and the harder I leaned and the more I leaned, the more I discovered how strong Jesus was.

Conclusion:

Friends if there was a person who didn't deserve to suffer it was Jesus. If there was a person who would have been permitted to cry out "WHY?" it wouldn't been Jesus. Jesus was perfect. He never sinned. He never harmed anyone. He never thought ill of anyone. He lived a sinless, perfect life. And yet God allowed him to suffer far beyond anyone has ever suffered. He was crucified and killed for our sins. And part of the reason he went through that was so that we would have to suffer for ever. Yeah, there will still be suffering for non-Christians and Christians alike, but for those who accept the suffering that Jesus went through for our sins, we won't suffer

forever. Sadness will turn to joy. Mourning will turn into dancing. Jesus will personally wipe every tear away. I hope you will invite him into your life.

Folks, suffering is a given. But to know why it happens can make these negatives into positives. It will give us new perspective. It will help us to bring glory to God and accomplish his mission. So let's not become defeated by suffering, but allow it to be used to do his will and benefit others.

