

Week 48: Suffering and Kingdom Advancement
November 30th – December 1st, 2019
2 Corinthians 4:7-18

INTRODUCTION

A few years ago, Second Baptist Church brought in Dr. Hugh Ross, an acclaimed Christian Astrophysicist, for a special seminar on “God vs. Science.” At the end of the session, Dr. Ross responded to questions from the audience. Many had complex scientific questions for him, but I remember one person had a very practical question. The young man asked Dr. Ross of all the questions he receives on the debate circuits, which question is the hardest to answer as a Christian apologist? I sat in my chair expecting a very scientific answer with lots of terms that I would not understand. Instead, Dr. Ross quickly and succinctly answered that the toughest question is, “Why does God allow pain and suffering in this world?”

Many would contend this is a tough question to grasp. If God loves us, why would he allow so much pain to happen in our lives? This is a tough question because it is a personal question. Every person on this earth is suffering or will suffer down the road. The suffering varies, but all suffering leaves scars. Some suffer physically in this world with pain, disabilities, and disease. Some suffer relationally with dysfunction and hurt in their homes. Others suffer financially with a consistent inability to make ends meet. Everyone suffers through the loss of loved ones as we all eventually attend the funerals of our closest friends and family members. With so much pain in our world, it is only natural to ask the simple question, “Why God?”

Many of our Biblical heroes asked the same type of question. Men and women in the Scriptures suffered and likewise turned to the Lord with their confusion. For example, Job is filled with chapters of one man’s heartache over his current conditions and cries out to the Lord. The Psalms are filled with prayers from David asking the Lord why his enemies are winning, and he is the one struggling. The Bible shows us that God can handle our questions. In fact, Peter tells us to cast all our cares on the Lord because He cares for us (1 Peter 5:6). And since God cares for us, He does give us some Biblical wisdom to the purpose of our suffering.

Today, we are going to look at the apostle Paul’s position on suffering. It is important to look at his words because if any individual was qualified to write a thesis on that topic, it had to be Paul. Paul experienced the full gamut of suffering from beatings, imprisonment, being shipwrecked, snake-bitten, stoned, betrayed, mocked, and eventually martyred. Indeed, the Lord was true to His word when he said Paul would learn how many things he would suffer for the namesake of Christ (Acts 9:16). Because of Paul’s unique resume, he is able to speak on the topic with great clarity and personal conviction. Through examining his words today, we will better understand why believers still experience pains of suffering, and more importantly, how we can persevere and honor God through it.

EXPOSITION

2 Corinthians 4:7 NKJV, “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.” (Chronological Bible, pg. 1504, November 29th)

Paul is known for his transformation. As you may know, before the apostle was known as Paul, he was formerly known as Saul. And Saul was a ruthless Jewish man with Roman citizenship that vehemently opposed the early development of the church as it branched off from Judaism. We are introduced to Saul in Acts 7 as a young Pharisee that was present for the execution of the church's first martyr, Stephen. While Saul did not throw the rocks himself, we are told he watched over the murderers' garments and spectated the public stoning with approval (Acts 7:58). In Acts 8 we are told that Saul "made havoc of the church," as he went house to house breaking up families and dragging Christians into prison. In Acts 9, Saul gets permission from the high priest to extend his jurisdiction outside of Jerusalem, so he can find more Christians outside of the city and drag them back into jail. It was on that wicked mission that Saul's life was forever changed. Jesus Christ met with Saul on the road to Damascus and ushered him into the city where he was blind for three days, working through these circumstances to giving him a brand-new life and purpose. Saul became known by his Gentile name, Paul, and moved from the church's greatest adversary to the church's greatest asset. Paul's zealous ambition transitioned from extinguishing God's people to advancing the Kingdom of God.

Yet, let us not forget that what is amazing about Paul's story is that not everything changed about him. His heart and eternal destination were changed instantaneously. However, his human condition was not. Paul was a brand-new man living in an old and broken world, inside an old and broken body. He was still plagued with ailments and aches. He still struggled and had to work a second job as a tentmaker. He was mocked and betrayed by his friends and peers. He still had enemies that opposed him, and in fact, his list of enemies grew even as a Christian! Paul learned from personal experience our first point today:

POINT 1 – The Gospel does not save us from suffering

This is why Paul says that we (as Christians) have "***this treasure in earthen vessels.***" What is the treasure he is speaking of? The Gospel of Jesus Christ. Like Paul, when we surrendered our lives to Jesus Christ, God put the treasure of His truth in our hearts. We carry inside of us the life-changing message of the riches of His grace. Like Paul, we are all now new creations (2 Cor 5:17), new ministers (2 Cor 5:18), and newly appointed ambassadors for Christ (2 Cor 5:20). But Paul also said we carry that treasure in "earthen vessels," or "jars of clay." Paul is saying our lives could be likened to a modest pot. We are still fragile and not immune to brokenness. We carry the hope and glory of Jesus Christ, but we carry it in imperfect lives.

This is a key principle to understand because a lot of preachers will tell you that coming Christ will not only change the internal, but also the external. We are still jars of clay, but we now carry the riches of His grace. One day, we will indeed be transformed into a new vessel, but that will not happen until we go home to Christ. Paul explains, "For we know that if our earthly house, *this* tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. ² For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven" (2 Corinthians 5:1-2).

Our new vessel in heaven will no longer face the sufferings that are present in our fallen world. However, the Bible states that we will still face suffering as we continue to walk in faith on this earth. Jesus declared it. He told us "*in this world you will have tribulation,*" and he even said that "*you will be hated by all for My name's sake.*" (John 16:11, Matthew 10:22). Paul went as far as to say that "*all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution*" (2 Timothy 3:12). This is why Paul appropriately explains our lives as jars of clay with hidden treasure. But while suffering remains for the

Christian, Paul does go on to explain that the purpose of suffering looks different for the believer in Jesus Christ.

2 Corinthians 4:8-12 NKJV, “⁸ We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed—¹⁰ always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. ¹¹ For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus’ sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. ¹² So then death is working in us, but life in you.” (Chronological Bible, pg. 1504, November 29th)

Paul does not shy away from the reality of Christian suffering, but he does explain that it looks different than the sufferings of this world. He says Christians may be hard-pressed, but not crushed. He says we may be perplexed, but not driven to despair. We may be perplexed, but never forsaken. Yes, we are struck down, but we’re never destroyed. In other words, we suffer but we always have the power to stand under it. Why is that the case? It brings us to our second point...

POINT 2 – The Gospel does redeem our suffering

Paul says we suffer so that “the life of Jesus may be manifested in our body” (vs. 10). Why would God allow us to suffer? In part, so that His glory and power might be seen through us in that tough season. Christians have access to a supernatural strength that is most clearly visible to the world during seasons of suffering. Paul reminds us that we haven’t been given a spirit of fear and timidity, but a spirit of power (2 Timothy 1:7). He also tells us that that same spirit gives the believer a peace that surpasses all understanding (Philippians 4:7). When we walk through a season of suffering, we are able to look different than the world. This stems from quiet confidence in our God and His ability to sustain us in any circumstance. Enabling grace is exactly why Paul claimed that he could confidently face any obstacle in this world (cf Philippians 4:12-13).

When you are in a season of suffering, God invites you to run to Him for all the power, grace, and endurance you need. That truth redeems suffering and transforms it into a blessing for the believer. Why? Because it opens up a door to an increased intimacy with Christ that would have never been experienced otherwise. Paul explained it best when he wrote,

2 Corinthians 12:9-10 “⁹ And He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (Chronological Bible, pg. 1512, December 1st)

Paul rejoiced in his suffering! He knew that if he was weak, God was going to step into the situation and make him strong. Paul understood that he would experience the tangible power and presence of God’s love in those difficult seasons of suffering. He knew God would refill his hope, joy, and peace during that dry season. He knew that God would teach him, mature him, and use his circumstances for God’s glory and sovereign purposes. So Paul did not shy away from suffering, he embraced it!

Unfortunately, many Christians fail to see it the same way. Many mistakenly believe suffering is a sign of God's abandonment. When the reality is, God's desire is to redeem that suffering and use it to lead you closer, not farther from Him. When we choose to run to Him in those seasons, it is amazing how God uses that circumstance to display his power through you to a lost world that is watching.

A few months ago, some friends of ours were victims to the floods of Tropical Storm Imelda. In a tragic reoccurring theme for Houston, thousands of people were impacted once again by the flood waters. A group from our church went to my friends' house to help them in the home remediation process. They were a young family with small children and were facing an uphill battle. As we mucked the house, they were throwing away most of their possessions as they were ruined by the flood. They had thousands of dollars of necessary home repairs ahead of them. They had to figure out how to relocate their family for months while their home would be restored. Nonetheless, I was amazed to see my friends maintain their composure and even their joy as we mucked their house. It was shocking for neighbors to see smiles on their faces and hope in their eyes. How could they carry that disposition in the midst of tragic circumstances? It's because as Paul said, "*when we are weak, he makes us strong.*" They sensed God's presence in their lives and in that situation. Their faith was increased as they saw God restore their hope and remind them of His sovereign provision in their lives. Their suffering served as a perfect reminder to all of us that when we run to God in moments of tragedy, and not from Him, God always gives us the grace we need to press on. And even further, God uses our suffering as a testimony of His power just as he was using my friends to shine His light in their neighborhood.

When hardships come, do you run to God, or from God? That is an important question to ask since we all will face suffering at some time in our lives. How you respond in those moments will impact the trajectory of your spiritual walk. [Paul implores us to do 3 things in those moments of suffering.](#)

POINT 3- Three ways to LOOK in the face of suffering:

1. LOOK FORWARD

2 Corinthians 4:13-15 NKJV, "And since we have the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, "I believed and therefore I spoke," we also believe and therefore speak, ¹⁴ knowing that He who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise us up with Jesus, and will present us with you. ¹⁵ For all things are for your sakes, that grace, having spread through the many, may cause thanksgiving to abound to the glory of God. (Chronological Bible, pg. 1504, November 29th)

Paul is quoting Psalm 116:10 when he writes "*I believed and therefore I spoke.*" Paul reminds his readers of a familiar Old Testament prayer of Thanksgiving in which the psalmist reflected on God's recent deliverance in his life. The writer first recounted how hard his life was and how he felt like the cords of death were entangling him (cf. Psalm 116:1-3). However, the writer then explains that his faith stood strong during that season of turmoil because he chose to look forward to the deliverance that he knew was coming.

The apostle Paul is saying we should take that same approach to our present-day suffering. He tells us that we have that same spirit of faith and can implement that same strategy. We too should look forward to the deliverance that is to come. Why? Looking forward puts our present day trouble into proper perspective. He writes, "*For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us*" (Romans 8:18). Paul looked forward to the

day where his suffering would end. He knew his current circumstances were not worthy of being compared to the deliverance that is to come one day for all of us who are in Christ Jesus. The truth is every believer will experience 100% deliverance from their sufferings. Some of us get to taste pieces of that in this world, but all of us will experience it fully when we go home to Christ. Because of that truth, Paul is imploring you and me to not become fixated on where we are at right now. Instead, we should look forward to where we are going.

2. LOOK INWARD

2 Corinthians 4:16 NKJV, "Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day."

Paul says don't lose heart over your outward troubles. Why? Your inward self can be made brand-new today! Paul says everything may be breaking down in your life, but Jesus Christ gives the promise to build your spirit back up every day. So instead of looking outward, we would be wise to look inward and seek out daily renewal in our lives. Paul knew this was so important that he actually prayed this for the church:

Ephesians 3:14-19 "14 For this reason I bow my knees to the Father ¹⁵of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, ¹⁶that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, ¹⁷that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height— ¹⁹to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God (Chronological Bible, pg. 1529, December 7th)

Paul prayed that God would strengthen each of us through His Spirit. Paul knew the only chance we have at enduring and finishing our race of faith is through a daily renewal of God's love and power. When you suffer, do you look outward or inward? Far too often, we look at our outward circumstances and relentlessly search for a source of healing. The truth is the real source of healing exists through Christ, and God is prepared to renew our hope and our minds every day. However, we must look in the right direction.

3. LOOK UPWARD

2 Corinthians 4:17-18 NKJV, "7 For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, ¹⁸while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal." (Chronological Bible, pg. 1529-30, November 29th)

Paul says our present suffering only lasts for a moment in the grand spectrum of eternity. He says this season of pain is working for us an exceeding and eternal weight of glory. How could that be? The more we suffer well, the more we look like Christ to others. Christ is the best example of suffering, as the Son of God took on all of the trials, temptations, and heartaches that we experience here on this earth and endured incomprehensible physical suffering on the cross. Nonetheless, we're told he suffered well, as he remained faithful and without sin. How did he do that? The author of Hebrews gives us a little insight when he writes, "looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was

set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2).

Jesus looked upward to the reward of what was to come. We’re told his eyes were on the “joy set before Him.” This joy was to come in His father’s presence when the suffering would end. He looked to the coming reward of sitting on the throne and providing a pathway for anyone to join him. You and I would be wise to follow Jesus’ examples in our seasons of suffering. We too should look to the joy before us. If you’re in Christ Jesus, the Bible tells us that you are a “co-heir” with Christ (Romans 8:17). We will get to experience the fullness of joy that he was looking upward to. One day, we will reign with Christ and get to share in His inheritance. Paul is telling us to look to the things that are unseen. Those things are so much sweeter than anything we can see on this earth. An eager expectation of heaven fuels our fight for faithfulness in seasons of suffering. So, Paul tells us to make sure we are not limiting our gaze to the things of this world. Instead, may we all take his advice to look up:

Colossians 3:1-4, “If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. ²Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. ³For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. (Chronological Bible, pg. 1534, December 9th)