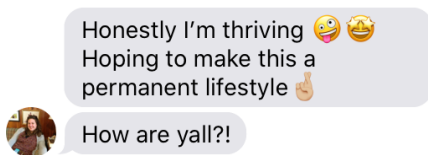


***Purposeful Suffering***  
*2 Corinthians 4:12-18*

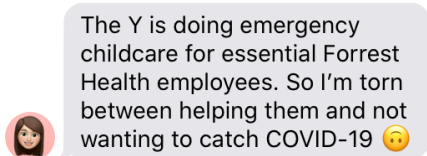
**Testimony** - Mark Spare. We asked Mark to share his experience to illustrate how God can use the difficulties that we experience in the lives of others. The lessons he learned during the fires in SW Kansas three years ago help him give perspective and counsel to others today.

The challenge for us during these days of COVID-19, I think, is to remain teachable so that we learn the lessons God wants to teach us. I also think it's important to acknowledge that different people are experiencing this pandemic in different ways; therefore, we will learn a lot of different lessons.

This was illustrated for me this past week as I was texting my "little nieces" who live in Mississippi. They're 29 and 27 years old, but I still call them my little nieces. I texted them this past week to see how they're doing in light of COVID-19. My first niece seems to be managing quite well:



That may express what one or two of you have thought. My second niece, however, is in charge of the children's programs at the local YMCA; she's having a rather different experience:



For her this pandemic has been very taxing and stressful. I just share this to acknowledge that our experiences over the past couple of weeks have varied considerably. If you are experiencing hardship, uncertainty, and suffering during this pandemic, I'll be encouraging you to be teachable so that don't miss the things God wants to teach you. If this pandemic hasn't been a particularly difficult time for you personally, that's completely fine; hopefully your well-being gives you the capacity to serve others and suffer alongside them. For the purposes of applying today's passage, you might think back to past hardships or to hardships that aren't necessarily related to COVID-19.

In today's passage, 2 Corinthians 4:12-18, Paul makes a couple of striking statements that reveal how purposefully he suffered. He didn't view his hardships as meaningless or incidental; they were full of purpose and essential for embodying the gospel.

It's worth pointing out that Paul was able to make these two statements after 20+ years of experiencing persecution and hardship. He learned these lessons over time the **hard** way (which also happens to be the **only** way to learn them). Don't be discouraged if you can't yet make these same statements. And if your life has been turned upside down by this pandemic, this may be a season for you to receive instead of give. Remain teachable and persevere and God will do in your life what he did in Paul's.

If we remain teachable, we will be able to say (along with Paul):

***"The hardships I've endured bear spiritual fruit in the lives of others."*** (2 Corinthians 4:12-15)

What Paul says in these four verses is very bold:

12 So death works in us, but life in you.

Here Paul is summarizing the preceding verses (which we discussed last week). Paul embodied the gospel so fully that his *suffering* demonstrated the death of Christ and his *perseverance* demonstrated the resurrection life of Christ.

When Paul says that "death works in us," he is referring to his experience of being "delivered over to death" when he went to various cities preaching the gospel. But because he was willing to face death if necessary, the result was "life in you." In other words because he embodied the gospel the Corinthians believed and experienced life.

13 But having the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, "I believed, therefore I spoke," we also believe, therefore we also speak,

Paul is quoting Psalm 116:10 where the psalmist expresses that he couldn't help speaking about the Lord because he believed so deeply. In the same way Paul believed the message about Jesus so deeply that **he** couldn't keep quiet. He had experienced God's power so abundantly in the midst of his suffering that he was compelled to share it with others.

In verse 14 he continues his thought, bringing back to mind their eventual resurrection:

14 knowing that He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will present us with you.

We'll be talking about this more next week and on Easter morning. Easter is going to be different this year, isn't it? Even though we won't be meeting together on Easter

morning, we will be celebrating the resurrection of Jesus just as joyfully as we ever have!

The principle behind Paul's statement here in verse 14 is that "whatever happened to Jesus happens to those who are in Christ." Romans 6 spells this out most clearly. If you are a believer, you have died with Christ, been buried with Christ, and raised up with Christ [spiritually, now] to a new way of life. You have become a "new creature in Christ" with new appetites and a new capacity to walk with Him. Here in verse 14 Paul looks to the return of Christ when all believers will be raised bodily just as Jesus was.

In verse 15 Paul returns to the idea that his sacrifices were for their sakes, but ultimately for God's sake.

15 For all things are for your sakes, so that the grace which is spreading to more and more people may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God.

Paul cared about the glory of God more than anything else. In this context "the glory of God" is basically God's reputation or fame. The progression here is that Paul sacrificed to bring the gospel to the Corinthians; the Corinthians accepted the grace of God offered in Jesus Christ; they then gave thanks for the grace/salvation they received; and finally, God's reputation swelled. Paul could draw a straight line from His suffering to the glory of God. His suffering was purposeful because it bore spiritual fruit that resulted in God's glory.

Paul made a similar point in chapter 1. He tells the Corinthians that the comfort he received from God equipped him to comfort others.

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, 4 who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

Here again we see how the hardships that Paul endured resulted in spiritual fruit in the lives of the Corinthians. But notice that was because he experienced God's comfort in the midst of his affliction. Paul said that the ". . . God of all comfort. . . comforts us in our affliction." Sometimes people respond to suffering by moving **away from God**, thinking that their suffering means that God doesn't care about them. But when Paul suffered, he moved **closer to God** and experienced comfort from God. Consequently, Paul was able to turn around and comfort others "who are in **any** affliction."

Paul was able to say, "*The hardships I've endured bear spiritual fruit in the lives of others.*" If we are teachable in the midst of our hardships, we will be able to say the same thing. Even though you may not have ever put it in these words, I know that many of you have endured hardships that bear spiritual fruit in the lives of others. In my own life, I can think of tough things I've experienced that God uses in the lives of others.

For example, until three or four years ago I never experienced debilitating anxiety. When others talked about their anxiety I wasn't really dismissive, but I couldn't really empathize with them. But now I can. God gave me comfort through others in the body of Christ - wise counselors and friends who talked with me and prayed with me and shared their own experience. And I pressed into Scriptures in ways I never had. It's still hard sometimes, but God has comforted me in ways that allow me to comfort others. There's a huge difference between sharing untested theories and concepts and sharing firsthand experience.

I would encourage you to make a list of the hardships you're experiencing because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Your hardships are probably related to the lessons you might learn that God can use in the future in the lives of others. For example:

- \* Staying-at-home all the time can be stressful on relationships between husbands and wives, parent and child. God might be teaching you patience or sacrificial love or self-control or forgiveness.
- \* God might be teaching you how to trust Him for financial provision or for your health.
- \* You might be learning how to "wait upon the Lord"; waiting is incredibly hard for most of us.

There are specific Scriptures that talk about each of those issues. Scripture isn't a quick fix; it's not like you can read a Bible verse like taking a pill, thinking that it will "make everything better." No, we need to let God's word do the work that only it can do; we need to abide in Christ and let His word abide in us until we experience its healing power. THEN (and only then) our hardships can bear spiritual fruit in the lives of others.

Remember that experience doesn't necessarily make a person wise; suffering doesn't necessarily make a person compassionate. If you live long enough you will have a wealth of experience and much suffering. But if you want to be able to say, "The hardships I've endured bear spiritual fruit in the lives of others," you have to be teachable.

My encouragement during our current ordeal is to seek God like never before. Don't waste this opportunity to learn some deep lessons that God can use to bear spiritual fruit in the lives of others. We don't know what God is preparing us for as a church, but I believe God is moving in our midst.

Second, if we remain teachable, we will be able to say (along with Paul):

***"My hardship produces for me an eternal weight of glory." (2 Corinthians 4:16-18)***

Beginning in verse 16 Paul makes a series of contrasting statements: outer man vs. inner man; seen vs. unseen; temporal vs. eternal.

16 Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day.

“Therefore” - in light of the fact that their suffering is producing fruit in the lives of others - “we do not lose heart.” To “lose heart” is to give up on a heart-level, to quit putting your heart into something. Even though he was afflicted, Paul didn’t lose heart because he understood deeper realities that many times we don’t.

Paul doesn’t sugar-coat his suffering; he says that “our outer man is decaying.” Earlier in the chapter Paul said that “we have this treasure in earthen vessels,” or clay pots. Since our humanity is inherently fragile and mortal, suffering takes its toll on a person physically.

But spiritually something very different was happening: “our inner man/person is being renewed day by day.” Paul’s inner life thrived because he sought after God daily. He experienced new vitality day by day. In other words, his outer condition didn’t dictate his inner condition. He experienced God’s renewing power in the midst of his weakness.

He further explains in verse 17. One reason why his inner man was being renewed was because he understood that how he lived in this life influences what he will experience in the next. I want to be careful to say neither more nor less than what Paul says here:

17 For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison,

Paul is saying that the affliction he experienced in this life produces (or results in) eternal glory. There is a cause and effect relationship between his suffering in this life and his glory in the next. This is very consistent with what Paul taught about rewards based on what we actually do “in the body” (see 2 Corinthians 5:10).

Paul calls his afflictions “momentary” and “light.” Over in chapter 11 Paul catalogs the afflictions he experienced. He mentioned things like being beaten with rods, being stoned and left for dead, being robbed, being hungry and thirsty and cold. How could Paul refer to those experiences as “momentary, light afflictions?” As for “momentary,” he was viewing them in light of eternity; his 30 years of affliction were momentary in light of eternity. And even though they were extreme, life-threatening situations, they were light/minor compared to the weighty/substantive glory accrued to those who suffer well. Paul isn’t trivializing his (or our) suffering; he’s putting suffering in this life in its proper context - the next life. The New Testament consistently urges us to view this life in the context of the next.

The expression “weight of glory” is interesting. It is derived from the fact that in Hebrew the word for “weight” is also the word for “glory.” The implication is that glory is weighty, substantive, and real. Many people think of this earth as “the real world” and heaven (or the afterlife) as something unreal. But the picture of the next life that we get from Scripture is very tangible: we will live in a new heaven and new earth; we will have immortal bodies like that of the resurrected Jesus.

Notice that Paul said “an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison.” In other words, the glory he’ll experience in the next life far outweighs the afflictions in this life!

In verse 18 Paul explains **why** he had this perspective; it involved his **focus**.

18 while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

The term translated “look” means to ponder or carefully consider something. Paul is telling us where he focused his attention. His attention **wasn’t** on “the things which are seen” - the scars from his beatings, the people who had betrayed him, the dangers he had faced; he didn’t focus on those things because they were “temporal” or time-bound (and would one day fade away). Instead, his attention was on “the things which are not seen” - the renewal he experienced in the inner man and the eternal weight of glory that awaited him, and the promise of being in the very presence of Jesus; he carefully considered these things because they were “eternal” - permanent and substantive.

Remember that Paul isn’t advocating some type of escapism in which we withdraw from the hardships we’re experiencing; he isn’t telling us to disengage from the people and situation we can see. No, Paul’s goal in writing this chapter is that we not “lose heart” and give up on serving God in this life (see verses 1 and 16). If we are going to persevere, we need to look past our sufferings and focus on God.

What will it take for you and me to be able to call our hardships “momentary, light afflictions”? How can we get to the place where we can say along with Paul, “*My hardship produces for me an eternal weight of glory*”? We will need to be intentional and tenacious about setting our focus upon the things God is doing in the unseen spiritual realm instead of being fixated on our hardship and loss. Many, many times a day you will need to bring your focus back to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - what the triune God is doing in this world during these uncertain days.

Examples:

- \* One person mentioned that he can get preoccupied reading news and seeking out the latest update on COVID-19. He wondered out loud how much better off he’d be if he spend half as much time immersed in news and spent that time meditating on God, praying for people, reaching out to others, etc.
- \* Another person cautioned against comparing ourselves to others, realizing that your role may be different from another person’s role. Someone else may be on the frontlines, so to speak, doing semi-heroic things; be content if your role is to stay home and pray and check in with others and write notes of encouragement.
- \* Maybe you need to stop staring at your dwindling bank account or your uncertain future. You might need to learn how to seek first God’s kingdom and righteousness, believing that “all these things (my material needs) will be added/supplied” to you (Matthew 6). Learn to pray to your Father in secret (whom you cannot see), “Give us this day our daily bread” (again, Matthew 6).

\* I've been trying to "redeem the time," being wise and noticing the opportunities that are right in front of me to do good (Ephesians 5:15-17).

Again, I would plead with all of us not to squander this opportunity to learn how to focus on God and His eternal purposes so that we might be able to say with Paul, "*My hardship produces for me an eternal weight of glory.*"

After I pray, we will have a couple of questions on the screen that you can discuss with your family or friends (if you're with others) or that you can ponder by yourself if you're alone. We will leave these questions on your screen for about 5 minutes. Then you will be dismissed.

**Slide: QUESTIONS:**

What hardships are you now experiencing that might equip you to minister to others?

What has been your focus this past week (the temporal or the eternal)? What can you do this coming week to set your gaze on the eternal, unseen things God is doing?

**Slide (for 10-15 seconds?):** Thanks for worshiping with us today. Go in peace.

**Slide (for 5 minutes? Or until the first NextGen video begins?):** NextGen Schedule