

Our Suffering and the Glory of God

2 Corinthians 4:13-18

Sunday, August 2, 2020

¹³ Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, "I believed, and so I spoke," we also believe, and so we also speak, ¹⁴ knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. ¹⁵ For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

¹⁶ So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, ¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

In the summer of 1967 a teenage girl and her sister took a trip to meet up with some friends at a beach on the Chesapeake Bay. At some point during the fun of swimming and splashing around, the active, athletic, life-loving young woman climbed to a place where she could dive into the water. Tragically, she didn't know that the area where they were swimming was dangerously shallow. Her dive ended up breaking her neck, severing her spinal cord, and leaving her to live the rest of her life quadrapeldgic -- paralyzed from the neck down.

Joni Eareckson Tada would spend the next few years of life learning how to survive and redefining what the term "quality of life" would mean for her now that she was forever bound to a wheelchair and dependent on others for many of her needs. During an interview on the 50th anniversary of her accident she recalled,

"I hated my paralysis so much I would drive my power wheelchair into walls, repeatedly banging them until they cracked. Early on, I found dark companions who helped me numb my depression with scotch-and-cola. I just wanted to disappear. I wanted to die."

Stories like this are frightening. They seem wrong and unfair. There is something deep within us that feels betrayed when 17 year olds lose their mobility, when loved ones get diagnosed with terminal illnesses, when a pandemic we don't understand endangers our lives in so many ways we lose count, or even when the weight of what we have to bear each and every day overwhelms us and makes us question whether what we're doing is worth the effort.

Suffering is somehow a universal human experience, and yet everywhere we find it seems like it doesn't belong. Something deep within our souls weeps from the knowledge that pain and brokenness are constant companions in this life.

Which becomes extremely difficult and unsettling to admit when we think of suffering in light of the topic we've been focused on for a few weeks: the glory of God.

Recall that our working definition for the glory of God is that it is the "*manifestation, or display, of God's moral perfection and beauty.*" The glory of God encompasses His power, His might, His sovereignty, His all his perfect attributes. As Christians we believe that we worship a glorified, glory-filled, glory-saturated God.

And yet...we also suffer. How could both these things possibly be true?

Today we will look at a passage in 2 Corinthians that I believe speaks to and provides some insight into the question, “*What does my suffering have to do with the Glory of God?*” How do I live as a follower of Jesus, a proclaimer of his Gospel, a worshipper of his majesty...while also struggling with suffering?

I know that, for many of us, this particular issue is where our connection to our faith is most threadbare. I would not be at all surprised if there are some gathered with us here today, or joining us online, who resist or even reject faith in Jesus because the world is filled with so much suffering, and you can’t reconcile the idea of a good God sovereignly ruling over a world plagued by pain.

I want you all to know that I don’t think these concerns or crises of faith are foolish, and I don’t take your suffering lightly. And while I do wholeheartedly believe God is with you in your hardest times, and that His Word that we will look at today can provide some comfort, and perhaps even purpose to your afflictions, my goal is not to simply gloss over your pain with nice Christian platitudes. The things we talk about today will take time to process, believe in, and put into practice. Still, my hope is to provide you with some clarity on what suffering means, and how it functions, in relation to our Christian faith.

Because when we get to a place where we better understand suffering (not necessarily a place where comfortable with it...I’m not sure that ever happens), we also get to a place where we can say things and believe things like Jodi Earekson Tada says -- now 70 years old, more than 50 years since her accident, still paralyzed from the neck down, and sharing wisdom like this with her brothers and sisters in Christ:

“Just the other day I was reading 1 Peter 5:10, where Peter says, “After you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace ... will himself restore, confirm, strengthen and establish you.” Honestly, I’m amazed that the last 50 years feel like only “a little while.” Maybe God does that when we finally do love Jesus more, when we finally do follow him more closely. Maybe he erases all the horror, all the despair, all the depression of the past when we learn how to trust God. He pushes into the background all the terrible times of anguish, and he brings forward the highlights—the moments of hope, peace, and growth. As I look back over 50 years, I just see God at work. That’s pretty exciting.”

My hope today is that I can help some of you see *the glory of God at work in your lives, even in the midst of suffering.*

In 2 Corinthians 4:13 we find a reminder of a pretty incredible promise that breathes life and hope into the hardships of our lives:

¹³ Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, “I believed, and so I spoke,” we also believe, and so we also speak, ¹⁴ knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence.

Paul’s quotation, “I believed, and so I spoke” is a reference to Psalm 116m where the psalmist remembers God’s faithfulness when he cried out in his distress. Paul promises believers that we can have this same sort of assurance in God’s care and love for us, even when we face trials and suffering, and then goes on to remind us that we have a display and proof of God’s goodness that is even better than any the psalmist could have known -- we have the Gospel, the life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus which makes a way for us to be rescued from our lowest lows and be brought into the fullness of the presence of God.

In Christ -- thanks to the Gospel he preached and lived out -- we also have the guarantee that *suffering does not get the last word*. In His abundant love, mercy, and grace, our glorious God made a way for us to endure suffering and **not** live forever in the shadow of death, but instead follow Christ through pain, through affliction, through persecution, through loneliness,

through everything that is horrible and terrible and wrong with this life...and into an amazing, wonderful, glorious eternal life with Jesus.

Because of this Gospel -- because of the outpouring of God's grace that causes us to overflow with thanksgiving, which in turn celebrates God's glory -- we don't have to lose heart. We have a hope that cannot fail and has already won. This is what Paul is driving at when he said in vv15-16:

¹⁵ For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. ¹⁶ So we do not lose heart...

2 Corinthians 4

So, ***because of this Gospel*** no matter what happens in this life we can cling to hope and “not lose heart” (v16).

But it is ONLY because of the Gospel that this is possible. Vv. 16-18 are meaningless without their Gospel context.

Please understand how crucial this is. Any attempt to endure, embrace, understand, or live with and through suffering must begin with our hearts and our deepest convictions standing firmly on the foundation of the Gospel. Without the assurance that we will be raised to life just as our Savior was raised and is now alive, suffering is just that: suffering.

Our afflictions can only take on everlasting meaning when they are understood in the shadow of the cross and the light of the resurrection.

We do not lose heart. Not because we're tougher than anyone else, but because we know we follow and worship a Savior who has endured suffering and defeated death. Jesus Christ and His Gospel are forever our example and our way forward.

And so now -- always keeping in mind this Gospel foundation we must stand on -- we return to our question, “*What does my suffering have to do with the Glory of God?*”

In v16 Paul profoundly states,

Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.

I doubt it's very hard for us to relate to the idea of our “outer selves wasting way.” I am a relatively healthy 32 year old, and I will somewhat sheepishly admit that I have run out of breath “hiking” to the summit of the Top of The World (which, for those watching online who might not be from around here, is a very tall HILL here in Manhattan). I used to be able to eat whatever I want; now if I have a slice of pizza I need some antacids a few hours later. My knees aren't great, I've had to get a new eyeglasses prescription every year for the past three years, and after 31 blissful years of never suffering from allergies, my body finally gave in, so now claritin is my new best friend.

These sorts of afflictions are annoying, but bearable. There are, of course, those for who “wasting away” is a hard, painful, terrifying reality. Chronic pain forces wonderfully brilliant and capable people to remain in bed all day. Mental illness robs some of us of the person we know we are, or could be, if our brain chemistry was just a little bit different. Terminal illness ravages bodies that once upon a time held so much healthy potential, or stole that potential before it ever got a chance to flourish.

From aging to illness to accidents, and everything in between, the part of ourselves that is exposed to the suffering and sin of this present evil age takes a beating day by day, month by month, and year by year. To this we could add the hurt we cause to one another, the affliction of persecution for what we believe, the destruction of life that results from injustice, and on and on and on...outwardly we are constantly caught up in a fallen world and a broken state of being.

BUT...for those who have met Jesus -- who call Him friend, Savior, and God -- the Holy Spirit lives within us, the presence of God restores us and constantly remakes us into something new and grander and more beautiful than we were the day before. And although we may feel a little more outwardly broken day by day, by the Grace of God we feel a little more inwardly renewed each and every day we spend with Jesus.

This is one of the wild, and truly unexplainable things about being a follower of Christ: ***Suffering, unlike anything else we experience, has a way of revealing the glory of God at work within us. (v16)***

What ought to destroy us (sickness and poverty and hatred and hardship and death) by the grace of God CANNOT destroy us, and instead makes us stronger by making us more dependent on God and more aware of His work in our lives.

In those moments when you realize the Good and Perfect God is doing things in your heart and to your inner self, making you more resilient, making you more holy by virtue of being in relationship with Him...there is a joy that cannot be reasonably explained in human or worldly terms.

A few years ago I unexpectedly developed some pretty intense anxiety (there goes my outward self wasting away again). That struggle brought me to my knees, and lower. I had days where I couldn't get out of bed. I had weeks where I wanted to quit on everything in my life, which was terrifying because that's not the person I know myself to be. It was horribly awful. I didn't want it then. I don't necessarily look back on it with very much fondness.

However...in that terrible season I cried out to God in ways I never have before, and was answered in deeply profound ways. I had layers and layers of pride stripped away from me. I learned to truly and rely on my church community in ways I never had before.

I learned to connect with the presence of God in me, even while weeping on the bedroom floor. What could have destroyed me -- what without God WOULD have destroyed me, much to the delight of this evil world -- ended up being the very instrument God used to reveal his glory and closeness and power to me.

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It's an incredible thing to discover that God is at work in you. And I'll be honest, I don't think that I'd go looking for Him if I didn't feel the need to do so. This hard and fallen world gives us plenty of reasons and needs to find an all powerful, very good God -- and He is gracious and faithful to be there when we go looking, and to reveal to us how He is at work deep within our hearts.

But that work is hard -- it hurts, because it dismantles the things we've clung to that we shouldn't. Which leads us to the next thing suffering can do for us -- ***Suffering conditions us to be ready to receive the glory of God ahead of us. (v17)***

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

Let's be very clear about something: Paul, and the Bible, and most importantly God do not belittle your pain. God hates suffering. It breaks his heart to see his children in pain for the consequences of sin that (justly) plague this world. It breaks his

heart so much that he laid aside the the glory of the heavens, assumed the likeness and the life of humanity, suffered alongside us, bled and suffocated to death on a cross, then just so we could have a way out of our own suffering -- a way into an eternal weight of glory.

And it's that eternal perspective that allows us to understand what we're suffering now to be "light" and "momentary". It's not that suffering in this life isn't hard -- it absolutely is. In the opening chapter of 2 Corinthians, Paul even talks about how hard his life and ministry had become:

8 We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself.

Paul felt the great pressure, the weight of his current sufferings. They made him hate his life a little bit. But here in chapter 4, he uses the same word for "weight" to describe what he's looking forward to -- the weight of the glory of God he'll get to take on, take up, and enjoy forever.

His suffering in this life (which please always remember is a result of living in a fallen world: God is graciously finding a way to give it a salvific purpose) made him so ready to take on the weight of glory that was coming his way in the heavenly presence of God.

God has graciously given suffering a greater purpose than sheer punishment or consequence. He's found a way to use our afflictions to help us grow into people who will love the Kingdom of God, and forget the Kingdom of the earth. To walk away from it joyfully, happily, and gladly carry the weight of eternity.

I don't know about you, but I know I need this sort of help. I need to be conditioned to walk further away from this world and further into the Kingdom of God. Suffering, whether I like it or not, does this. And if I'm honest with myself...even though it hurts, I'm grateful for God finding a way to infuse purpose into my pain.

There is one other purpose to suffering we need to point out: ***Suffering gives us the chance to demonstrate to others that we really do believe Christ is our best hope -- better than anyone or anything else we could rely on in this world. (18)***

¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

What Paul is saying here in v18 is that in the midst of this life and all the suffering that comes with it, he keeps his eyes fixed on the unseen -- on the eternal life to come, on Jesus, on the glory of God.

The only reason to do this is if you really do believe that Jesus is your best hope. That the Gospel is the best promise. That God really does love you, and that love can comfort you during and overcome any suffering you might experience.

That demonstration of faith -- of continuing to believe in God and hope in Jesus in the midst of your suffering -- will absolutely confound the world. The enemy has NO answer for that sort of commitment; no counter for that depth of love for God. The world has no grid, no category to make sense of that supernatural paradox.

I came across this quote, by Chelsea Sobolik, while preparing for this sermon that I thought beautifully captured the testimony can can pour forth from our suffering:

When we respond to suffering well, we practically demonstrate to the unbelieving world that Christ is more glorious and precious to us than any pain and difficulty we might endure. We have the opportunity to show where and in whom we find our true treasure. By placing our ultimate hope in Christ rather than in the temporary things of this world, God receives the glory.

God receives the glory when we suffer well, when we choose to continue to trust him...and the world looks on with wonder. People in your life will desire the hope you have. And maybe, just maybe, your faith in the midst of suffering will bless you with the opportunity to share Jesus with someone who needs to meet him, to trust him, to love him forever.

A few closing thoughts:

First, I mentioned this before, but please understand that EVERYTHING we talked about today takes time to become a reality. Very few people wake up with a switch flipped that makes suffering endurable because they've latched on to a heavenly, eternal perspective. You've got to spend time with God. Share your pain with other believers. Grow and change and transform with the power of the Holy Spirit. It took me MONTHS to work through my anxiety, but by the grace of God (which by the way included a little anti-anxiety medication called citalopram) I can now understand how that suffering led me closer to him. But give yourself the blessing of time. God's not going anywhere, and he's not leaving you behind. Walk with, shuffle along with him, sit on the ground and cry into his shoulder if you need to. But take the time. It's worth it to take the time to learn to trust God with your suffering.

Second, if you feel overwhelmed by your suffering, please reach out to the church. We've got a number of ministries here specifically designed to walk alongside folks during the hardest parts of life. Stephen Ministry can provide counselors, HEART ministry can comfort those who have experienced miscarriages or infant loss, and of course we've got pastors and elders and compassionate leaders who are ready and willing to listen and pray. Do NOT suffer alone. We're here for you.

Finally, I'm going to close with a thought from one of my heroes. I reached out to this person for some thoughts on the glory of God and suffering because (1) I feel like experimentally I am a novice in this department (2) when you know someone who knows more than you, it's good to ask them for advice.

So, here's a little wisdom from my mom, Jennifer Creagar, who is a mother of three, suffers from chronic pain, survivor and defeater of breast cancer, and who facilitates the compassion ministry for one of the largest churches in the Kansas City Area (like I said, my mom is one of my heroes, I like to brag on her):

What glorifies God is how his compassion and care is revealed through those who suffer. It's not always easy to see.

When I had cancer and I was sick and scared, I experienced God's love and care and especially presence, in a whole new way. I learned what it was like to truly experience God sitting with me. I learned things about peace and comfort that I didn't know before. Inwardly, I was being renewed. Outwardly, I was throwing up and in a lot of pain and looked like crap.

God was also glorified in the way people cared for me – calls and notes, and visits, and meals, and so many prayers. I didn't even know about it until long after, but when I had the pneumonia and was in the hospital on the vent, my boss held a prayer service for me in the chapel during the work day. I was told later how much people felt God's presence there. God was glorified, not in my sickness, but in the gathering of believers to pray and reach out to him.

Suffering, whether it is illness, or fear for someone we love, or any other human thing, reveals our constant need for Christ. God is glorified because we have to open up to him, even even if it is calling out in anger. God fills the voids in our life if we let him, and when we do that, our earthly life looks and feels like his Kingdom come.

