

What Paul Learned through Pain

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

Almost eight years ago to the date, on a summer day, I preached a message from the same text we will be considering this morning. It was the first Sunday after I was diagnosed the first time with Colon cancer in 2015. In the introduction to that message I shared the following words:

“A few weeks ago, I experienced some severe pain in my abdomen. It occurred in the evening for a few minutes. At night the pain came back and persisted. I was up all night. In the morning, I ended up in the emergency room.

After about 3 hours of waiting, I said to my wife, “My love, the pain has subsided. I feel better. Let’s get out of here.” She said, “Oh no, we are waiting here until you see a doctor.” I’m glad I did.

When I finally got to see the doctor and after running some tests, the doctor said that they found what looked like an infection in my intestines. She gave me some antibiotics and pain meds and referred me to a specialist for a Colonoscopy.

This past Tuesday I had the Colonoscopy, which revealed that I have a large mass the size of a grapefruit in my intestines which was later confirmed to be cancerous. It looks like, because it was detected early enough, that it has not spread anywhere else. The Doctor believes that this is 100% treatable and that after surgery to remove the mass and chemotherapy, I should make a full recovery.

Although this was a shock to me, it was not a shock to God. Has it ever occurred to you that nothing has ever occurred to God? I believe with all my heart that God is up to something great in my life and in the life of our church and that through the prayers of many we are going to see God's grace and power like never before.

I believe that God doesn’t want me to waist my cancer, rather He wants us, my family and my beloved church family to learn some life

transforming lessons that will bring us into deeper experiences of God's presence and power in our lives. Can you all believe with me that God is up to something great?

[Colon cancer is referred to as the silent killer]. I thank God for the pain that I experienced a couple of weeks ago. If I had not experienced that pain and waited it out in the ER, I wouldn't have known that there was something much more serious going on inside of me that needed the care and attention of a skilled Physician.

Furthermore, I believe that there are some spiritual lessons and blessings that God wants to reveal not only to me, but to all of us because first, we are in this together. And secondly, the bible and life teach us that we often learn and experience more of the deeper blessings of God through pain not apart from it.

Main idea: Pain can be a great teacher when in our weakness we run to Christ, hear His voice and receive His sustaining grace.

As we did eight years ago, this morning we are going to learn some vital lessons that Paul discovered through pain and prayer.

1. Pain is a better teacher than success.

The first lesson that we can glean from what Paul discovered in adversity is that pain is a better teacher than pleasure, comfort or success. Keep in mind that in the previous chapter Paul began to present his ministry credentials. He did so to deal with the false teachers in the church who were tearing him down in order to gain power and control.

The super-apostles, as Paul referred to them, reflected the culture of Corinth that viewed prosperity and wealth as a sign of wisdom and success. Moreover, they were drawing away the Corinthian believers from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ by their outward performance, by appealing to their Jewish ancestry, and their oratory skills.

So, in order to expose and defeat the wolves in sheep's clothing, and rescue the Corinthians from their demonic influence, Paul was forced to talk about himself, which he hated to do.

But although Paul could match them in his Jewish pedigree, and surpass them in the knowledge of God, he didn't emphasize those things. Instead, he chose to emphasize the qualities of Christ-like servanthood, and the adversities that he suffered in the ministry, all of which his detractors despised.

With this in mind, notice that Paul continues in verse one:

"I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. ² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. ³ And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—⁴ and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. ⁵ On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses—⁶ though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me." 2 Corinthians 12:1-6

We see in this passage that as Paul continues his boast, which he did not find personal value in, he moves on to what he called visions and revelations of the Lord (v.1). But as Paul expounds on how he received divine revelation, he begins to refer to himself in the third person.

No doubt he does so because he's uncomfortable boasting about himself even though he's doing so for the good of others. Paul did not want to be a glory thief, which is a quick way to quench the Spirit whose primary ministry is to glorify Jesus in and through us.

How many of you know, the most faithful and God glorifying servants of Christ have been those who are content to work behind the scenes without any fanfare or need to be in the limelight.

Now regarding his heavenly experience, Paul testifies of being caught up to the third heaven, which speaks of the unseen dwelling place of God where He commands the heavenly realm and is worshiped.

Moreover, this was such a transcendent experience that twice Paul emphasized that he was not sure if he was in his body or in the spirit when he was brought into what he referred to as paradise.

Concerning his reference to paradise, Kent Hughes explained: “There in the paradise of the third heaven Paul saw the resurrected Christ, and there he saw the souls of the redeemed “at home with the Lord” (5:8), awaiting the crowning consummation of their salvation, the bestowal of their glorious resurrection bodies as the new heaven and the new earth are inaugurated and all God’s purposes are finally fulfilled. There in paradise Paul heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter” (v. 4). What he heard was beyond utterance, not because they were unintelligible or because there was any deficiency in Paul, but because God had forbidden Paul to speak of them. They were private. They were given to Paul for his own personal benefit, not to pass on.” Kent Hughes

Interestingly, there are people today who claim to have had after life experiences and can’t help but to tell everyone, write books about it and make money off their story. Paul, on the other hand, hardly spoke of it.

Now, although Paul received such rapturous revelations, he explains in verse 5, and this is the key point, that he would rather boast about his **weaknesses**.

Paul understood that his greatest strength was not found in projecting an impressive image of himself, or in financial security or in the success he had in ministry. These are the things that his opponents trusted in to gain influence over people. And he knew he was not above falling into the same trap.

Beloved, we live in a society where comfort has become the goal of life. To enjoy comfort is not a sin. But the problem comes when comfort becomes god in our lives. A life of ease and comfort has a way of dulling our spiritual senses and more specifically dulling the sense of our desperate need for God.

Pain, on the other hand, is a master at teaching us about the things that matter most. It teaches us, among other things, that we are human. That we are not in control. That there's something wrong in our world that man can't solve, namely sin.

Pain is not always the direct result of our sin, but it's always the result of living in a fallen world that only the grace of God can redeem and restore.

“C.S. Lewis put it this way: “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”

Additionally, if you want to mature in life and in your ability to deal with challenging circumstances, pain is a given. Anyone who has ever developed good character or achieved a worthy goal has done so by learning through their adversity and pain.

Even though Paul was given special revelations that were literally out of this world, they were not what made the greatest difference in his life. Paul boasted more in his weaknesses than in his mystical experiences because in addition to teaching him about the things that matter most, he also did not want others to get the wrong impression of him. As he explained in verse 6: *“but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me.”*

Paul did not want to project an image that not only wasn't true of himself, but that would lead others away from the source of true spiritual power.

Timothy Gombis in his book “Power in Weakness gives” us this helpful insight: “Ministry settings are ripe for [all] sorts of image and power

dynamics. Pastors can project an image through the construction of a church website and use of social media that may have points of contact with what is really true, but they may end up signaling to others an image that extends beyond the truth. Pastors, like anyone else, are real people, with real struggles and failings, and their lives are filled with lots of mundane activities. It is also true that many pastors long to cultivate authenticity and vulnerability. But the dynamic of image cultivation is always at work to seduce us into constructing an image for others in our churches and the wider public. What we fail to realize, however is that such a pursuit marginalizes the power of God and puts us in situations where we are ministering without the power of God at work. Thinking that we are strengthening our ministries, we are actually cutting off the source of their life and power.”

So knowing the susceptibility that we all have in times of prosperity and success, Paul also reveals in verse 7 what he learned in a time of hardship, which kept him from becoming prideful: *“So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.”* 2 Corinthians 12:7

Many bible teachers over the centuries have speculated about Paul’s thorn in the flesh. Some suggest that it could have been a person or persons influenced by Satan that constantly criticized and opposed Paul’s gospel ministry. Others have suggested that Paul’s thorn was a physical malady or emotional distress.

Although I believe that one can make a good argument from scripture that the thorn could be multiple debilitating physical ailments, which also contributed to emotional distress, we can’t say for sure. It’s been said that the fact that we don’t know for sure may be divinely ordained. The ambiguity has made room for us to apply what Paul learned from his hardships to the various afflictions that we all experience in life.

Furthermore, Paul himself doesn’t clarify what the thorn is because the main point he wants to get across is not what kind of pain he

experienced. Rather he wants us to learn from what he did with his pain and what he discovered as a result.

Before we get into how Paul responded, it's important to note that whatever this thorn in the flesh was, Satan had a part in it. Let me emphasize that Satan is not behind every problem or sickness that we have. We live in a fallen world. And let's be honest, many Christians today are not much of a threat to the plans of the enemy.

Another important truth to be gleaned from Paul's thorn is that although the enemy is at work to keep us from living an abundant Christian life, he is under God's sovereign control. When we are living under God's authority, what the devil plots for evil, God plans for our good. What he tries to do to make us bitter, God will use it to make us better.

Again, the important thing about our text is not what Paul was dealing with, but how he responded. He didn't hide his weaknesses from people, lest they get the wrong impression of him and he certainly didn't hide them from God.

We come now to a second lesson that Paul learned and that we need to learn through pain.

2. Prayer is more than talking to God; it's listening for His voice

Paul not only understood that pain is a better teacher than success, but also that the great value of prayer is more than talking to God about what we want, it's listening for his voice. To put in another way, the greatest value of prayer is prayer itself rightly understood as communion with God.

After explaining that the thorn in his flesh, which made him weak, was permitted by God to keep him from being conceited or self-absorbed, which would forfeit God's power, Paul adds: *"Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. ⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."* 2 Corinthians 12:8-9

We know from this passage and others that Paul was a man of persistent prayer. I've been asked by others who have not received answers to their prayers, "Pastor, should we ever stop praying about certain things?" I believe a good answer to that question is, "We should keep praying until God answers."

In Paul's case, how did God answer his prayer? God's answer came through a word of assurance.

During a Wednesday night prayer meeting years ago, Ovi, one of our elders, shared this quote, "The value of persistent prayer is not that He will hear us, but that we finally hear Him."

We will miss God's best if when we pray we seek only what we want from God and not what He wants to do in us and through us during times of hardship and difficulties.

Contrary to the false word of faith movement, if you're going through a difficult season, you don't have to be in denial out of fear that if you name it you will be claiming it. Demons, diseases, or declarations do not have sovereign control over your life. God is in control.

Knowing this, Paul pleaded with God to remove his thorn. He wasn't in denial about it. He knew that God had the final word—he knew that it's God's word that matters most not our words—not our positive or negative declarations of faith.

Moreover, it was God's words of assurance and resting in them that made all the difference in Paul's life and that will make all the difference in our lives.

Let me add that the more God's word is richly dwelling in our hearts, the more confidently, fervently and effectively we will pray. When we take the time to hide God's word in our hearts and pray them back to God, our prayers will not only be in tune with God's purposes, but we will find that the greatest blessings of prayer is that they cause the promises of His word to come alive in our hearts.

In a recent message, Pastor Jim Cymbala shared: “For our faith to grow, we have to be in fellowship with the Lord. We have to have real communion— not a dead god that you just study and give lectures about, but a living Christ, who speaks to you through his Word and in times of prayer, so you can sing [like the old hymn declares]: “And he walks with me, and he talks with me, and he tells me that I am his own!”

Beloved, when you have God’s word of assurance in your heart, you will be able to face even the greatest of difficulties with the peace and hope of the Holy Spirit.

3. Power comes through weakness.

Now in addition to learning that pain is a better teacher than success, and that prayer is more than talking to God; it’s listening for His voice, Paul learned through pain that power comes through weakness. After hearing from God in prayer and receiving the assurance that His grace is enough, Paul continues:

“Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” 2 Corinthians 12:9-10

When Paul testified, *“I will boast all the more gladly of my weakness,”* he doesn’t mean that he enjoyed the hardships that he experienced. Rather, Paul came to realize and gladly embrace the revelation that sometimes our greatest need is a need. He embraced his weaknesses knowing that when he gave them to God and leaned on Christ’s sufficiency, Christ’s power would rest upon Him.

Likewise when our sense of neediness before God’s worthiness leads us to seek His face, we will discover, as Paul did, that His grace is enough—that Jesus is more than sufficient in all circumstances.

Notice that Paul further testified that *for the sake of Christ*, whose grace he experienced in communion and service, he was content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.” v.10a

Again Paul is not saying that he enjoyed going through these afflictions. Rather, as he elaborates, *“For when I am weak, then I am strong”* (v.10b). In other words, he was content in spite of all the hardships because when his weakness drove him to God, he found that more than deliverance from trouble, the greater blessing was experiencing the grace, love and fellowship of Christ. 2 Corinthians 13:14

Paul learned through bringing his pain to Christ and listening to His voice that prayer not only changes things, but more importantly prayer changes us. Prayer changes us when we learn that what God has to say, what God wants to reveal to us about Himself, and what God wants to do in us and through us is the greatest value of prayer.

It’s important to emphasize that when Paul said that for the sake of Christ he was content to suffer pain and adversity, he is demonstrating that as Christ suffered for our sake, he was willing to suffer for the cause of Christ. He was willing to endure hardship through the power of Christ so that others would know like he knew that Jesus is enough.

Through the grace that he availed himself of in a time of pain through prayer, Paul had taken on the heart of Christ. Prayer changes things, but more importantly prayer changes us.

This was the power that Paul experienced in pain and that we must seek, power to be more like Christ, power to die to self so that the life, hope and love of Christ shines in and through our mortal bodies.

Conclusion

Eight years ago I closed my message from our text by sharing, “I’m entering one of the most difficult seasons that I ever experienced. But I know in my heart that God is able to deliver me in answer to prayer.

And more than that, I believe that God wants to show me—God wants to show us that more than being pain free we need to know that the greatest value of persistent prayer—the greatest value of making our corporate prayer meetings a priority—the greatest value of interceding in prayer for others continually, is hearing God's voice and experiencing the power of His grace working in us and through us for our eternal good and the eternal good of others.

Knowing that this is what God wants to do in us, in my family and in our church family, I boast in my weakness for the sake of Christ. I don't want to waste my cancer. If we can all learn from it and come to know our God more intimately for the greater fame of Jesus, it will be worth it all."

That was eight years ago and after not one but two battles with cancer, I can boast in the Lord and tell you with confidence, His grace has brought me safe thus far and grace will lead me, will lead us home.