

Lessons in the School of Suffering

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Bible Text: 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

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Good morning.

It is wonderful to be home here in Philadelphia and back at Tenth Church. We are actually not even really officially here in America. We will be back some time next year for starting our official furlough, so don't tell anyone that you saw me. We are actually here kind of just for some emergency support raising purposes due to the recession and also because of some severe currency devaluation of the US dollar compared to the Japanese yen. Our family's support account and also the support account for the seminary have been under some significant pressure. So we ask that you would continue your prayers for our ministry and also pray for the Lord to provide the needed finances.

At the same time we are also moving forward with great hope that—and with our prayers—that the Lord might provide a campus for our seminary and also for a future project of our hopes to start an undergraduate program as a part of Christ Bible Institute. So we pray that the Lord might also provide in those areas and God is able. So we go forward with great confidence, but we do appreciate your prayers.

I also want to give a special thanks to Bill and Debbie Lankford because basically we would not be here in Philadelphia this summer without their help. So if you are here, thank you.

The ministry in Japan and our ministry has been wonderfully blessed and we are seeing growth in many different areas. First of all in our family. We are now a family of seven. The Lord has added to our four daughters who are now nine, seven, five and three a baby boy, Michael Junior who just turned one last month. It is not true that we were trying for a boy. In fact, we were not even trying for number five, but God has his purposes and his plan. And so we rejoice in those.

If you had a chance to watch my talk from the 2009 Desiring God Pastor's Conference which happened this past February... if you get a chance do watch that online and you will see why my son is famous. There was a video of that people... Forget everything else that I said, but said, "Oh, the video of your son was precious."

So, yeah, we are here this summer, all seven of us, very, very encouraged and blessed to be with you all. The ministry that the Lord has also given us in terms of mission mobilization has been a great privilege and a joy for us to be involved in over the last couple of years. I had the joy of getting the invitation from Aaron Messner and Christie Fitzpatrick to be at Covenant College in November and to speak six times for their global gospel advancement conference. Flew from there to Wheaton College to speak there and so it has been a great joy to be a part of calling the church to the mission that the Lord Jesus Christ has given to the Church.

Also it has been a great joy to be involved in helping to shepherd and encourage and teach the global church. It has been, I guess, six months ago when I was in Hong Kong spending some time with some leaders from the underground church in China from 14 provinces. I give you greetings from the church in China. There are great encouraging things going on there, also great challenges and also great dangers there besides all of the wonderful blessings. So please do pray for the church in China as she seeks to be pure and faithful in her mission.

And, as well, in Japan and we have seen wonderful blessing and growth over the past couple of years. It has been just a great joy to be there working among young leaders in Japan. Our students, some of our students were here in January of 2007 here at 10th church visiting with you all and actually since that time our student body has doubled and the Lord has raised up wonderful young people to study his Word at our seminary. And also a year ago we actually started a church planting project called all nations fellowship and we have seen in that as many as, I guess, about 90 people or so who have come out and joined us for worship which in Japan practically qualifies us as a mega church, Japan being the largest unreached nation in the world where the Protestant church going population is 0.2 percent.

We have four of our students from the seminary who are interning at All Nations Fellowship and one of those is a young man named Showhe and Showhe accompanied me in a trip where I was speaking in Korea in May. As I was praying for Showhe I prayed, "Lord, show him my weakness during this trip."

And I felt that the Lord had answered my prayer when I lost my voice during the third of my five talks.

After the [?] was finished we rushed off to the airport for our 7 PM flight, got there at 6:20 because of the traffic. We rushed through check in, threw our bags at the lady and ran through customs immigration, ran to the gate and got to the gate at 6:30 which, if you are familiar with Seoul's Incheon Airport you know that that is nothing short of a miracle.

The next morning I was putting away my books and my clothes and I noticed a big hole in the seat of my pants and I thought to myself... you know, I was kind of disappointed thinking I had ruined my favorite pair of pants running through the airport. Later in the

day I went to the seminary and saw Showhe and I said, “Oh, Showhe, you know, I was putting away my clothes and I noticed this big hole in my pants.”

And Showhe says to me, “Yeah, I saw that.”

And I said, “Oh, you saw it at the airport?”

“No at the retreat.”

And then I realized God had answered my prayer to show my student my weakness just in an entirely different way than I expected and the 300 other people who were there at the retreat.

I think, however, that some of the most important lessons that our students have been able to learn at our seminary have really been from seeing our suffering and seeing our weaknesses.

Many of you are familiar, are familiar with the challenges that we have been going through with our second daughter Michaela and being told by the doctors in Japan just one week, actually, after the seminary opened, “Your daughter has a brain tumor.”

This year has been very challenging for me personally with throat issues and also with both hypersensitivity and also hearing loss in my left ear. I think I am in the wrong business if I can’t hear and also speak. I guess at that point I will know that God is calling me to do writing.

Actually in a few weeks our academic dean, Craig Chapin, will be flying for Nagoya to Baltimore to meet with specialists at Johns Hopkins University Hospital because he is beginning to lose his sight in his left eye.

But through it all our students have been able to see painful and joyful life application of the wonderful theology that they are learning.

And also through it all Tenth Church has been by our side. And I want to say thank you. Thank you for standing with us.

In 2006 when I spoke here at the missions conference—if some of you remember—the theme was suffering. The individual suffering and the salvation of the world.

Today, again, I will be preaching on suffering. And next year when I return to speak again here for the missions conference, I can’t promise you that I won’t speak again on suffering.

Now in today’s passage I would like to talk about two of the many lessons that I believe God was teaching Paul that I would think... I think he would also have us to learn in the school of suffering. And the first lesson is this: that Paul learned that his own solutions to

difficult situations must yield to God's better one. Paul learned that his own solutions to difficult situations must yield to God's better ones.

In this passage Paul is giving an autobiographical account of his unspeakable glimpse into heaven itself. Paul was being challenged by false teachers who claimed that he had absolutely no apostolic authority. And here Paul reluctantly defends the extent to which God had truly authorized his ministry as an apostle.

In Corinth there were these false apostles who laid claim to apostleship and were preaching another gospel as Paul describes it. And there can be no doubt that the primary aim of Paul's adversaries was to undermine and destroy Paul's apostolic authority. They calculated to bring about Paul's downfall and to establish their own credentials as apostles of Christ. They accused Paul of acting capriciously and lording over his converts. They ridiculed his letters as unintelligible and devious. They scorned him as, oh, being very impressive at a distance, but weak and contemptible when he deigned to make a personal appearance.

They boast about themselves. Proof of their genuine apostolicity could be found, they claimed, in their polished eloquence and their erudite knowledge, their visions and revelations, their healing miracles, their possession of these commendatory letters, their pure Palestinian origin.

As one commentator wrote, "Boy, it is little wonder that the impressionable Corinthians were swayed by the vaunted self sufficiency of these rival claimants to apostleship."

So Paul was faced with this quandary about what to do with these false apostles. And I think that possibly he was thinking about two verses in the Bible, two verses actually in Proverbs. The first from verse four of chapter 26, "Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself."¹

But I think he was also, perhaps, thinking of another verse also in Proverbs, actually the next verse, 26:5, which says, "Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes."²

And it seemed that Paul in the wisdom of the Lord had reluctantly decided that this situation called for answering a fool according to his folly lest he be wise, lest they be wise in their own eyes and lead the Corinthians astray.

So Paul's boasting moves from the apostolic trials that he shares in chapter 11 to visions and revelations in chapter 12. Now Paul's reluctance here is seen even in his use of the third person when talking about this amazing experience in heaven where he saw things not permissible for him to share.

Verse two.

¹ Proverbs 4:26.

² Proverbs 4:27.

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven... And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell.³

And yet this incredible experience is counterbalanced by the humbling effect of an affliction that was given for him to bear, verse seven:

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.⁴

Now the thorn was possibly a physical pain, possibly something different. And it caused Paul such anguish, such severe anguish that he prayed again and again for God to remove it. Paul probably thought, surely if I pray this thorn will be removed and I can be more effective for ministry.

But God said no.

Again, the first lesson that Paul learned was that his own solutions to difficult situations must yield to God's better one. And this is a lesson that we all must learn. We must realize that God's purposes are far greater than simply achieving the absence of pain in our lives. Ultimately we must trust that God has control of all things and is working in our lives with perfect wisdom and love and faithfulness.

Now it is natural and right to ask God to remove difficulties. And often he will answer by removing them. But there also comes a time when it becomes clear that our prayers must shift from, "God, remove this from me," to, "God, give me your grace. Give me your grace and help me to endure and to learn."

Sometimes we must learn to ask not for less thorn, but for more grace.

How do you respond to challenges and difficulties?

You know, do you fight back in your own strength, willpower? I can do this. I can beat this.

Do you respond to suffering and difficulties by worshipping your weakness? You know, it is hopeless.

I can't handle it. I am too weak. In fact, I am so weak in this situation is so hopeless that even God can't do anything about it.

³ 2 Corinthians 12:2, 3-4.

⁴ 2 Corinthians 12:7-8.

And, brothers and sisters, that is not faith. That is not humility. That borders on heresy.

Or do you blame God? Because, you see, all challenges, all pain, all suffering is bad. Why God? Or do you yield to temptation and distraction to relieve pain through pleasure. Kind of like when a baby cries. You know, every single adult, like looks for a toy or candy to grab saying, “Don’t cry. Here it is. Come on. It’s ok.”

And while that might be ok for a baby, I can’t think of a more dangerous thing for an adult.

Giving in to seeking pleasure, drowning out our pain and our sorrow in food, entertainment, sexual immorality, drinking, drugs, buying more things to feel a little bit better. Or, if you are like God you ask God to simply change the circumstances. “God, remove this thorn.”

Again, we must all learn that our solutions to difficult situations must yield to God’s better ones. God is good. God is wise. God is sovereign. Trust him in your sufferings.

Now the second lesson that Paul learned was that experience the power of God in weakness. We experience the power of God in weakness.

Verse nine. “But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’”⁵

God is so gracious to teach us of the reality of our weakness. God was gracious to remind Paul of his weakness. You know, when suffering comes it doesn’t make us any weaker than we are. Instead, what it does is it shows us, it reminds us, it teaches us how truly weak we are and how desperately we need God. It reveals to us reality like a medical test that reveals a serious sickness.

You don’t blame the test. It simply and graciously reveals reality. It is a biblical irony that when I am weak then I am strong. But when we are able to learn, sometimes painfully that we are truly weak the grace and the power of Christ become ours.

And that is why suffering not only is not a curse from God, but it is truly a gift from God. This is gospel grace, God showing us our weakness, our sin, our desperate need for him and God providing a Savior. Gospel grace, this is gospel grace needed both at the moment of our saving faith and also at every moment, at every moment of the Christian life. We never outgrow our need for God’s grace and our need for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Now Paul had tremendous spiritual privileges that can often lead to spiritual pride. And that pride is extremely dangerous because it can deceive us into thinking that we are somehow better than others and that we don’t need God. God’s way of keeping us

⁵ 2 Corinthians 12:9.

humble is often to empty us of all human resources until we are ready to be filled with God's. Trials wean us from the dangers of trusting in our own strength.

And God afflicted Paul in love and in wisdom. This thorn was given to him to keep him from pride and boasting in the amazing things that he had seen. And God had a lesson to teach Paul, that his grace is sufficient and it is enough.

I am sure every single one of us here right now or in the past or some time in the future, you know, we suffer because of some very painful thorns. Perhaps you would even ask how could a loving God allow me to suffer like this?

And God wants you to know that his grace is sufficient. God's grace was enough for you to become his child for those of you who know him, to forgive you of your sins, to give you eternal life. God's grace is still enough even to get you through the very hard times in life. And also suffering is not in vain. It is not in vain. God will use our hard times to mold you and to sanctify you and conform you more and more into this beautiful image of his Son Jesus Christ. And others will be blessed through you.

You know, our goal for life should not be the absence of pain, but, more importantly, to know God. And it is very often that we know God most when we have nothing else to hold on to. Therefore, you know, while all these false apostles are... are boasting in Corinth about their... their polished eloquence and their erudite knowledge and their power, Paul finds his ultimate boasting in his weakness.

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, [why?] so that Christ's power may rest on me. That 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.⁶

And that also is where we ought to find our ultimate boasting in our weaknesses. Why? So that the power of Christ may dwell in us.

You know, so many Christians and... and myself included, you know, we basically live life so as to avoid suffering, do we not? In every area of our lives we live life trying to work towards a situation where we need no faith and need not God.

Living life with its ultimate goal to be comfortable, physically, emotionally, financially, spiritually.

Brothers and sisters, if this were Jesus Christ's goal to become physically emotionally, financially spiritually, he would have stayed in heaven. He would have stayed in heaven.

Instead what did the true goal of the Christian life? To glorify God and enjoy him forever. What is often the path to knowing that goal? Sanctification in the school of suffering.

⁶ 2 Corinthians 12:9-10.

You know, sometimes we marvel when we read about Christians in China or Sudan or other places around the world in the midst of persecution. I have a friend Alemu in Ethiopia who three times had been at the edge of a sword, at the point of a gun. And we ask why are they so faithful? Why are they so godly?

It is because they only have Jesus. And in the midst of these sufferings they come to know God intimately as they cry out to the Lord. You know, for us it is too often Jesus plus, Jesus plus our money, Jesus plus our health, Jesus plus our ability, Jesus plus, plus, plus.

For many Christians around the world when they pray and they say, “Lord, give us this day our daily bread,” they don’t know where their next meal is coming from. How about you? In your life what else do you trust in, do you cherish, rely upon, that hinders your reliance upon God? Jesus plus what?

The Bible makes it clear that if we want to be Christians who look like Jesus, who are filled with the power of God, who can be faithful even unto death, then we must learn that God’s grace is enough and we must learn to experience the power of God in weakness and in suffering.

Paul said:

Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.⁷

Peter says:

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.⁸

Let me suggest to you a very simple prayer that you might pray if you want to know God, if you are serious about knowing him deeply and intimately. It is a prayer that I prayed several times over the last 20 years of my life. It is a prayer that I knew God would answer and it would result in great difficulty and also in great joy.

And the prayer is this: Lord, sanctify me no matter what the cost. Help me to know you and to learn to rely upon nothing else. Burn away every trace of sin within me, even if the process causes much pain. At any cost, oh Lord, be glorified in my life.

⁷ Romans 5:3-4.

⁸ 1 Peter 3:12-13.

When you face difficulties in your life instead of praying: Why, why? Cry out to God saying, “More of Jesus, more of Jesus in my life. More of Jesus in my life.”

Now probably each one of us is struggling in some way right now with a thorn that seems to be painful to bear. Maybe very serious painful struggles, perhaps family problems, perhaps work problems, you are out of work perhaps, physical ailments, financial worries, maybe even persecution.

Maybe you have, like Paul, pleaded for God to remove it. Yes, God knows your struggles. Yes, God is still in control. Yes, you can and you must trust him. Yes, God has a purpose in it all. No, he may not remove it from you, but yes, God’s grace is sufficient for you because God...

Because Paul understood this he could boast in his weakness and rejoice in his sufferings.

Let me just give a few points of application for you to consider. Number one, sharing with others about your suffering is healthy and strengthening. I encourage you to share your struggles, your suffering with Christians you can trust, with people who can encourage you, pray for you and share the love of Christ with you. But at the same time also let me caution you not to let that sharing be time simply to complain and to whine, but to be a time for mutual turning to God, a time of spiritual enduring and thanksgiving and a time of rejoicing in weakness.

Secondly, those who have suffered can help others who are suffering. All that Paul learned through suffering enabled him to minister more effectively to those around him who were suffering. Suffering equips us to comfort others more effectively because it helps us to know and commend God and the sufficiency of grace. Suffering shows people around you the power of the gospel.

Now this is most true in evangelism and in missions. Every Christian has a story to tell of weakness, of sin, of hopelessness, of rebellion, of hurt and a story of hope, of forgiveness, of healing. Evangelism is simply sharing your story and the gospel that made your story possible. Missions is simply sharing that story and gospel in nations and to peoples where they have little or no opportunity to hear such a story.

Kind of like what I shared from Psalm 22 a few, two, three years ago when I was last here with you. As we suffer and rely upon God we are changed. As we worship him in the midst of our suffering and we testify of his faithfulness and grace to others, to other socioeconomic classes, to other nations and races and to other generations, people are changed and blessed in relationship to Christ. And that it is not just that God is faithful to you in your suffering, in your personal suffering or that he has a purpose for it in us, but that suffering has missional purpose with global implications.

Thirdly, suffering confirms the faithfulness of God to each individual and to the Church.

I want you to know that when challenges and difficulty and suffering come into your life, they are not signs that God has abandoned you. Instead, they confirm God's faithfulness to you and that you are truly his child, his true child whom he will not abandon, his true child whom he has promised to teach, to sanctify, to purify, to wean from self reliance and to fill with great power.

And in the same way challenges and difficult from God to the Church, these are not signs of our estrangement from God. Instead, they confirm his covenantal love and commitment to sanctify the Church and the assurance that he will not abandon nor allow us to remain unfed, unclean, immature and self reliant.

And then, finally, number four, keep your suffering in perspective. Keep your suffering in perspective.

As I go through various physical suffering in my own life, I often remember one of my students, A G Watanabe, a father of four little boys who has a pace maker. What do I have to complain about?

As we struggle with support and finances I think of two of my students who have cut back on eating because of financial difficulties. Yes, Japan is a very expensive, wealthy nation, but the church is very, very poor.

And then, finally, and most importantly, in terms of keeping things in perspective, it would do us well to remember that Christ, too, had a thorn. Christ, too, had a thorn. It was the cross. He, too, prayed three times asking that it might be removed and God the Father at that time also said no.

But Christ trusted the Father and not human resources. He endured the cross by the power and grace of God so that we might know him, his grace and love and learn more and more to lean upon Christ even in the midst of our most difficult days.

There was a path of righteousness that Jesus Christ, the suffering servant walked. And in the very middle of that path was an unavoidable cross. It is the thorn, the cross of Jesus Christ that makes forgiveness of sin and eternal life possible. Christ saved us. The thorn of Christ, the cross of Christ, Christ saved us from ultimate suffering, the punishment due our sins on the cross.

If you today do not personally know such love, such mercy, such hope, such joy, in relationship to Christ through his cross, through his thorn, I invite you to learn more about this hope giving gospel here at Tenth Church.

And for those of you who do call Christ Lord, it is a thorn, the cross of Jesus Christ that makes our endurance of suffering possible and also our spiritual growth through suffering possible. All of the suffering that we could possibly encounter here on earth pales in comparison to the suffering that Jesus Christ bore for us on the cross.

As one person said, “Everything that does not resemble the fires of hell is grace.”

And that same Christ calls to us. “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”⁹

I want to end with a few lines from a poem from *Streams in the Desert* that reminds us and has reminded me over the years of God’s abundant grace in suffering. I actually first heard this poem from a woman named Darlene Rose who suffered terribly at the hands of the Japanese during World War II.

It goes like this.

God giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater;
He sendeth more strength when the labors increase.
To added affliction He addeth His mercy;
To multiplied trials, His multiplied peace.

When we have exhausted our store of endurance,
When our strength has failed ere the day is half done,
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources,
Our Father's full giving is only begun.

His love has no limit, His grace has no measure,
His pow'r has no boundary known unto men;
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus,
He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again!

Let’s pray.

Gracious Father, gracious loving Father, make us holy even as we are holy in your Son. Make us holy. Whatever the cost, oh Lord, help us to know you and to rely only upon you. Show us where we are trusting in other things, in other people instead of you. Give us grace as we lean upon you in our sufferings.

We ask that you would use such suffering to mold us into the image of Jesus Christ. Use them to make us useful for your kingdom. Remind us again, day by day, of the meaning of the cross and of the wonder of the gospel of Jesus Christ in his precious name we pray. Amen.

⁹ Luke 9:23.