

Paul: From Persecutor to Preacher

Lesson 8: Hard Pressed but Not Crushed: Labor, Suffering, and Sufficient Grace -- 2 Corinthians 11:23–33; 12:7–10

We tend to picture the apostle Paul at his best: standing before kings, preaching to crowds, writing letters that would shape the world. We forget what it cost him. In Corinth there were polished speakers who boasted of their credentials and looked down on Paul as unimpressive. So Paul, almost against his will, opens his ledger, not of triumphs, but of scars. And what spills out is staggering. “Far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death.”

He keeps going, and the list is hard to read slowly without wincing. Five times he received thirty-nine lashes. Three times he was beaten with rods. Once he was stoned and left for dead. Three times he was shipwrecked, and once spent a night and a day adrift in the open sea. He knew danger from rivers, robbers, his own people, Gentiles, the city, the wilderness, and false brothers. He knew toil and hardship, sleepless nights, hunger and thirst, cold and exposure. And on top of all of it, he says, came “the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.” This is what faithfulness looked like in the body of a real man.

Then Paul tells us about something he could not fix and God would not remove. He calls it “a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me.” We do not know exactly what it was, some persistent pain, illness, or affliction, and perhaps that is mercy, so that every sufferer can see themselves in him. Three times Paul begged the Lord to take it away. He was an apostle who had healed others; surely he could be healed himself. And three times the answer came back, but it was not the answer he wanted.

The Lord said, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Not, “I will remove it,” but “I will be enough in it.” And something broke open in Paul. He stopped begging and started boasting, not in his strength but in his weakness, “so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” “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.” This lesson sits with Paul in his suffering and learns the strange arithmetic of grace, that God’s power is perfected not in our strength but in our weakness.

Group Discussion: Paul boasted not of his successes but of his sufferings and weaknesses (2 Corinthians 11:30; 12:9). That runs completely against the way our culture, and often our own hearts, measure a successful life. Why is weakness so hard for us to embrace, and what might we be missing because of it?

Personal Reflection: God answered Paul’s desperate prayer not by removing the thorn but by promising sufficient grace (2 Corinthians 12:8–9). Is there a ‘thorn’ in your own life, something

painful you have begged God to remove and He has not? How have you been responding to His 'no,' and what would it mean to trust His grace as sufficient?

Read 2 Corinthians 11:23–33; 12:7–10

Study Questions

1. Paul lists an astonishing catalog of sufferings, beatings, imprisonments, shipwrecks, dangers, hunger, and the daily pressure of his concern for the churches (2 Corinthians 11:23–28). What does this list teach us about the true cost of faithful service to Christ, and why is suffering not a sign that something has gone wrong in a believer's life?
2. We often quietly expect that following Christ should make life smoother and easier. What have you actually risked or suffered for the sake of Christ, and has your picture of the Christian life left room for hardship, or have you assumed faithfulness should be rewarded with comfort?
3. Rather than parading his credentials like the 'super-apostles' in Corinth, Paul said, "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness" (2 Corinthians 11:30). Why does Paul deliberately boast in weakness instead of strength, and how does this overturn the world's, and the church's, usual measures of greatness?
4. We are trained to project strength, competence, and having it all together. Where are you most tempted to boast in your strengths or hide your weaknesses, even before God? What would it look like to stop pretending and let God's strength show up in your acknowledged weakness?
5. Paul says the thorn was given "to keep me from becoming conceited," and he calls it both "a messenger of Satan" and something given by God's purpose (2 Corinthians 12:7). How can the same affliction be a tool of Satan to harass and yet be used by God for Paul's good, and what does this teach about God's sovereignty over our suffering?
6. Paul's thorn was a source of ongoing pain that God chose to use rather than remove. What is the 'thorn' in your own life right now, an illness, a limitation, a difficult relationship, a loss? Are you mostly fighting it in frustration, or beginning to ask what God might be doing through it?
7. To Paul's repeated prayer, the Lord answered, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). What does it mean that God's grace is 'sufficient,' and why might His refusal to remove the thorn actually be a deeper answer than the healing Paul requested?
8. Think of a prayer God has answered with 'no' or 'not yet.' How did you respond, with resentment, confusion, or trust? How does Paul's experience reshape the way you think about unanswered prayer and the goodness of God when He does not give what you ask?
9. Paul concludes, "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses . . . For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10). How does this 'strength in weakness' confront the popular teaching that faith should bring health, wealth, and an easy life, and

what does the New Testament actually promise believers about suffering and the sufficiency of God's grace?

10. Look back over Paul's scars, his thorn, and the grace that proved sufficient. Name one specific way you sense Jesus using this passage to form you, whether to brace you for the cost of faithfulness, to help you embrace a weakness, or to trust His grace in a place where He has said 'no' to your prayer.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: 2 Corinthians 4:7–18, the treasure in jars of clay, hard pressed but not crushed; Philippians 4:11–13, contentment and strength through Christ in every circumstance; Romans 5:3–5, suffering producing endurance, character, and hope; 2 Timothy 3:12, all who desire to live godly in Christ will be persecuted; James 1:2–4, trials producing steadfastness that makes us complete