

Life Together

*Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?
If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him.
For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.
(1 Corinthians 3:16-17. ESV)*

*And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same
image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.
(2 Corinthians 3:18. ESV)*

The School Of Affliction

June 12th, 2016

2 Corinthians 11:16-33

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Introduction:

Good morning! Open your Bibles to 2 Corinthians 11:16; that's on page 969 in your pew Bibles. As Pastor Levi said last week we are coming now to the end of the Corinthian Correspondence and so given the way that Paul has been arguing you will start to notice some overlap and repetition. Jewish arguments are often circular and holographic, meaning they generally circle back and double down at the place where they began and that is what we see. A lot of what Paul is saying here he said already back in chapter 1. But now he is bringing this argument in for a landing and so the structure of our message this morning will reflect that approach. I want to make sure that we have brought this in for a landing. I want to make sure that we have thought through the street level implications of what Paul is saying in this text. So we will read it together, we will discuss it and then by God's grace we will apply it to our lives and to our journey together as a church. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

¹⁶ I repeat, let no one think me foolish. But even if you do, accept me as a fool, so that I too may boast a little. ¹⁷ What I am saying with this boastful confidence, I say not as the Lord would but as a fool. ¹⁸ Since many boast according to the flesh, I too will boast. ¹⁹ For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves! ²⁰ For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face.

²¹ To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that! But whatever anyone else dares to boast of—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that. ²² Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. ²³ Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. ²⁴ Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; ²⁶ on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from

robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers;²⁷ in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.²⁸ And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.²⁹ Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?³⁰ If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.³¹ The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying.³² At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me,³³ but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands. (2 Corinthians 11:16–33 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Way back in chapter 1 Paul argued for a connection between suffering and ministering as a servant of Christ. He said:

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 may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction (2 Corinthians 1:3–4 ESV)

Do you remember that? Way back at the start of this letter Paul argued that God ordains suffering for Gospel ministers in order to prepare them to minister Gospel comfort to other people. God does that and its good that he does, Paul says, because we live in world FULL OF HURTING PEOPLE. Therefore God has a plan to train his people by enrolling them in the School of Affliction. That is the point that Paul has been labouring to make and now he is bringing that argument in for a landing by means of what is often referred to as “The Fool’s Speech”. The fools speech is a masterpiece of Greek irony and rhetoric, which is itself somewhat ironic, because one of the criticisms of Paul is that he was not a master of Greek rhetoric.

Now irony is not something that translates well into the English language and culture. We don’t do a great deal of irony and when we try to do irony we generally only reveal that we have no idea what irony is – a fact demonstrated very well by Alanis Morissette to her everlasting shame. The only irony about her song “Isn’t It Ironic” is that nothing she says in the song is actually ironic. Everything she mentions – “rain on your wedding day”, “a free ride when you’ve already paid” – those things are actually unfortunate coincidences – none of those things are actually ironic. Irony has to do with things that are the opposite of what they appear. Like for example when the soldiers put a purple robe on Jesus and a crown of thorns and they mock him as ‘the king of the Jews’ – that is incredibly ironic because he actually IS the king of the Jews, more than that he is the King of the World – he is the very opposite of how he appears in that moment!

That's irony and Paul is making an intentionally ironic speech. He tells them that he is doing this so that there can be no misunderstanding. He says: "I am about to speak foolishly – I am going to do the opposite of what I should do to show you that you believe the opposite of what you should believe about Christian ministry". They believe that God validates and commends a Gospel minister by ensuring his health, wealth, general prosperity and success. They have therefore been slow to respond to Paul because Paul is frequently sick, frequently poor and has been subjected to numerous public and ministerial humiliations and apparent failures. So Paul doubles down on that and in effect begins to boast in all of these weaknesses, humiliations and failures. The point he is making is that these various afflictions – far from disqualifying him – these are the very things God has used to MAKE HIM an effective Gospel minister. They have this issue 100% WRONG. They believe the exact OPPOSITE of what is actually true.

Now because we don't get irony in our culture I plan on skipping right to the point. The point that Paul is making is that far from disqualifying a Gospel minister, suffering, failure and weakness are actually used by God as courses in the School of Affliction. This is the path of preparation and anointing for Gospel ministers and so with Paul I want to make sure that we have got this and that we are prepared to EMBRACE this as a Gospel reality for our lives together. And so I want to ask and by God's grace answer a couple of very practical questions this morning as we reflect on the text. First of all I want to ask:

What Kind Of Suffering Are Gospel Ministers Likely To Experience In God's School Of Affliction?

Now before we address that question we need to define our terms here. I have chosen the term "Gospel Ministers" very carefully here because while every scholar and commentator seems to agree that the most obvious application of this teaching is to pastors and elders everyone also seems to agree that this teaching applies in a general sense to all Christians who minister the Gospel. Hebrews 12:6 says for example:

For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives." (Hebrews 12:6 ESV)

So to be clear EVERY BORN AGAIN CHRISTIAN is enrolled in the School of Affliction. This is generally true for all believers and it is particularly true for elders and pastors. So the discussion we are about to have applies to every believer in this room.

What manner then of suffering is likely to be experienced by a Gospel minister? 4 varieties in particular seem to come to mind:

1. The agony of sin and spiritual striving

The Apostle Paul had been taught to hate and fear the power of sin. Listen to what he says in Romans 7:

¹⁸For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. ¹⁹For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing....
²⁴Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? ²⁵Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 7:18–25 ESV)

That is the testimony of a man who knows what it is to BATTLE with his sin. Even though Paul changed dramatically under the operation of the Holy Spirit and even though he became a great Apostle and powerful minister of the Gospel the scars of that battle never completely healed. When he wrote to Timothy late in his life as a mentor and more spiritual and godly man he still referred to himself as the chief of sinners. He knew his scars.

Every minister of the Gospel must have a deep and visceral hatred for human sin. He must LOATH IT. He must be afraid even to touch it – Jude, the brother of Jesus told Christians to:

show mercy with fear, hating even the garment stained by the flesh. (Jude 1:23 ESV)

You should go out into the world of sin to save sinners but you should go terrified of contamination and praying to God “do not lead us into temptation but deliver us from evil”.

Now for some of us who were saved very young, God may need to enrol us in a remedial course. If you were saved so young that you never tasted the poison and power of sin then God may ordain a season for you, during which his protection is temporarily removed so that you can experience your own weakness and spiritual inability. I pray that doesn't happen, but one way or the other, it is absolutely necessary for every Gospel minister to have a healthy fear of sin.

The second variety of suffering that is likely to be experienced in the School of Affliction is:

2. The agony of physical weakness, sickness and human frailty

Let me state what I hope is the obvious truth: Pastors are not exempt from normal human suffering. Pastors get sick. Pastors get cancer, diabetes, they get Alzheimer's disease, they suffer from dementia, they get pneumonia, they have strokes, heart attacks and they die. Even pastors who claim not to believe that must ultimately bow to the reality of that inescapable fact.

This past week the Christian Media world was busy reflecting upon the passing of Jan Crouch, co-founder along with her husband Paul of the Trinity Broadcasting Network. They are the folks who made the prosperity Gospel and the name and it and claim it version of evangelicalism the dominant consumer brand of Christianity in the United States of America. She was often telling her viewers to claim their healing and yet she died two weeks ago of a stroke at the age of 73 – apparently with her healing unclaimed. The article in Christianity Today goes on to remark carefully:

“Her husband Paul passed away about two and a half years ago after chronic heart problems.”¹

I don't want to try and say anything funny or disrespectful here, I just want to say this. You can name it claim it all you like, but at the end of the day this truth cannot be avoided. Every minister of the Gospel gets sick and dies. Cancer rates among Christians are pretty much identical to the cancer rate among the general population. The death rate among anointed Gospel preachers is pretty much 100%. No where in the Bible are ministers of the Gospel promised an exemption from normal human suffering. In fact in the very next chapter of this letter Paul expands upon one of his own particular ailments. He talks about his “thorn in the flesh” and he describes it using the Greek word *astheneiais* which the dictionary defines as follows:

- a state of debilitating illness, sickness, disease.²

The Apostle Paul – the most Christian man ever, the most anointed Gospel minister ever suffered from debilitating illness, sickness and disease – that is a fact with which there is no intelligent

¹ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2016/may/died-jan-crouch-cofounder-trinity-broadcasting-network-tbn.html>

² BDAG, 142.

disagreement.

Christians get sick. Pastors get sick. Sickness is a required course for all Gospel ministers in the School of Affliction.

The third variety of suffering that is likely to be experienced is:

3. The agony of parental failure and domestic heartbreak

It is amazing to me how many of the great pastors and preachers and missionaries in the Christian church had children who walked away from the Lord. J.C. Ryle – generally considered the second greatest preacher of the Gospel in the 19th century after his friend Charles Spurgeon had 4 children and only 1 of them followed him in the Christian faith. One of his sons became a liberal Christian clergyman and believed almost everything his father spent his life preaching against. Two of sons had no interest in the Gospel and his daughter was a faithful believer. One for four. J.C. Ryle was not a bad parent – it would be easy to write off that story if J.C. Ryle was one of those pastors who served his church at the expense of his family but that is not the case. Even his son who grew up believing the exact opposite of him spoke warmly about his father’s gentleness and attention to them as children. J.C. Ryle wrote a book on how to raise up children to love and serve the Lord, it was called “The Duty Of Parents” and it had as its subtitle Proverbs 22:6:

Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.
(Proverbs 22:6 KJV)

And yet three of his four children did exactly that. That’s why Proverbs are Proverbs and not promises because in this fallen world things do not always work out the way they should. And there is no greater suffering in this world for a Christian parent then the first hand experience of that truth. And preachers of the Gospel are sometimes reminded of this so that they do not preach a soul destroying Gospel to their people. We must never communicate that if we do it right then we control the outcome – GOD IS STILL SOVEREIGN and salvation still has nothing to do with our merit – not even the salvation of our children. Please believe that – please let me never forget that – lest the Lord remind you and me of this fact.

Neither pastors nor their people are exempt from parental failure and domestic heartbreak. The fourth variety of suffering that is likely to be experienced in the School of Affliction is:

4. The agony of spiritual conflict, division and defection

The Apostle Paul mentioned this type of suffering in the fool's speech. He talks about false brothers in verse 26 and in verse 28 he speaks about:

the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. (2 Corinthians 11:28 ESV)

Paul took the health of his people personally. Paul was no Stoic. When he wrote to Timothy late in his life you could hear in his voice how personally he took spiritual conflict and defection:

⁹Do your best to come to me soon. ¹⁰For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. (2 Timothy 4:9–10 ESV)

Demas has deserted ME. Not “the Gospel”, not “Jesus”, not “the faith” but ME. Now, I'm sure Paul knew that the far more significant fact was that Demas had deserted Christ but sometimes for a pastor those really do feel like one and the same.

Every pastor has to deal with this in a way that is particular to pastoral ministry. We've been careful to say that everything we've talked about applies to all Christians generally – and that's true but I also said that this applies to pastors particularly. Think of it this way, the previous points are like “General Courses” in the School of Affliction – everyone has to take them – but this one is a required course for those engaged in pastoral ministry.

Pastoral ministry is unavoidably personal. Preaching is theology through personality meaning when you say you hate the sermon or say that it was boring or didn't help you in any way – just understand that I can't hear that as anything other than a partially personal statement. When you say: “Pastor its nothing personal but we're leaving and going to the church down the street”, I will smile and say that I'm just glad you've found a church that meets your needs but understand this: I'm lying to you. A pastor can't NOT take that personally, and yet he must not. Ultimately the pastor does have to understand that it really ISN'T about me – but understand that you will learn that easier than I will. I will need constant help from God to understand that. It is a daily

pressure and any pastor who tells you that it isn't is lying to you.

Now, I called that the fourth course in the School of Affliction but I did not say that it was the final course. Of course there are more courses and God will tailor a program that is perfectly suited to you and to the ministry he has prepared in advance to be your way of life. Those that I listed are the Core Courses but there are many more. Paul talked about his beatings and his shipwrecks and his imprisonments – those were pretty unique courses that God put the Apostle through. You may not experience any of those things but you will go through God's program for you in the School of Affliction. No Christian is exempt.

So what does God mean to accomplish through all of this? What does God mean for us to learn in the School of Affliction? That is the second question that I want to ask.

What Does God Mean For Us To Learn In The School Of Affliction?

Very briefly and from 2 Corinthians as a whole let me suggest 3 things. Number 1 it appears that God means for us to learn basic empathy.

1. Empathy

Paul made this point way back in chapter 1.

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. (2 Corinthians 1:3–4 ESV)

Are you hearing that? God ordains particular difficulties for you so that he can minister to you in them and by them prepare you to minister similar comfort to others. He wants you to know that of which he means for you to speak.

Why does God insist that we have some experience of the sinfulness of sin? Why were some of us saved only AFTER a HORRIFIC battle with the power and dominion of sin? Why were some of us only set free after we had felt the full demonic power of our adversary? Why didn't God spare us that ordeal? Because he means for you to speak to sinners! And he means for you to

have some honesty and some desperation in your voice when you do so.

And why has God allowed you or a loved one to struggle for an extended time with a serious illness or physical frailty? Because there are sick people out there who need Jesus and a person who is living their best life now may not be well positioned to reach them. God means for us to develop empathy.

He means also for us to learn humility.

2. Humility

I love how Paul ends the Fool's Speech; look at verse 32. He tells them how he escaped Damascus – now notice that he doesn't tell them about his supernatural conversion on the way into Damascus – that was the type of story that the false apostles would have certainly shared; Paul doesn't tell them that story he tells them how he left: in a bucket; through a window; down the wall. "I left the same way the chamber pot is emptied in the morning. That was my glorious exit from Damascus."

God knew how to keep Paul humble and he made use of a variety of tactics over the course of his life and ministry. God cannot and will not use a person who is overly impressed with their own giftedness and natural capacity and therefore most gifted people experience some form of therapeutic humiliation. Whether a thorn in the flesh, a spectacular failure or a bucket through a window, God knows how to make his servants aware of their natural and spiritual limitations.

Thirdly and finally, God means also for us to learn:

3. Dependency

These are related but not identical lessons, I think you will see the difference when you remember what Paul said about his afflictions in 2 Corinthians 1:9. He said:

Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. (2 Corinthians 1:9 ESV)

Do you see the difference? Humility is about knowing WHAT YOU CAN DO; dependency is about knowing WHAT GOD CAN DO. Those are different things. Humility is about knowing that you cannot control outcomes. You cannot MAKE your children love Jesus. You cannot CONVERT a city, you cannot BUILD THE KINGDOM, you cannot keep your converts persevering in the faith. You CAN'T DO ANY OF THAT – but thanks be to God – HE DOES ALL OF THAT according to his plan and purpose. And when you know BOTH OF THOSE THINGS – together - it changes how you do Gospel ministry. It leaves you trusting in the ordinary means of prayer and preaching and it leaves you resting in the Sovereign Grace of God.

Conclusion:

My dear friends, I cannot promise you a life free from pain and suffering. To do so would be to contradict the clear word and promise of Jesus Christ who said:

In the world you will have tribulation. (John 16:33 ESV)

But here is what I can promise you. God will never waste your pain. He will meet you in it and prepare you through it to minister the Gospel in His Name.

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. (2 Corinthians 1:3–4 ESV)

For the glory of God – for the sanctification of the church and for the salvation of the nations - this is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God. Let's pray together.