



Authentic Suffering 2 Corinthians 1

Introduction – Doing hard things.

- how frequently do you look at a task or responsibility that lies before you and think, “that’s going to be hard”?...
 - does that happen on a fairly regular basis for you, or is your life filled with different variations of the “easy button”...
 - no, we’re all called upon to do things that are hard, all the time...probably daily...
- now let me ask you this – what happens next?...”that’s going to be hard”...then what?...
 - therefore I’m not going to do it?...how long would you get away with that approach to life?...
 - your boss asks you about the status of a work assignment...you e-mail back – “I’m sorry, I just decided it was too hard”...would he/she e-mail you back – “my mistake, here’s an assignment that’s easier...please enjoy your day...”?
 - how about, “that’s going to be hard, so I’ll do it...later”...
 - Anyone here like that?...
 - and there again, does that approach serve you for long?...
 - no, just because something’s hard does not mean that we shouldn’t do it...or can’t do it, or won’t do it...
- in fact, from the perspective of Christian theology, we would even say that...

1. Attempting to do hard things for God is often especially good for us...why?...several reasons...

a. Because it puts the sufficiency of our own resources in their proper place.

Psalm 20:7 - Some *boast* in chariots and some in horses, but we will boast in the name of the LORD, our God.

Psalm 33:17 - A horse is a false hope for victory; nor does it deliver anyone by its great strength.

- some of us can get a bit big for our britches, especially if things are moving along fairly well...
- and some of God’s people would even prefer to not do hard things because they fear what the end of their own resources looks like...they cannot see beyond that...in essence, they are trusting in their own horses and chariots as if that’s all that’s involved in the battle.

b. Because it puts us in a position where we have to rely on His strength and wisdom, not our own.

- **Philippians 4:13 - I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.**
- **Jeremiah 9:23-24 - Thus says the LORD, “Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,” declares the LORD.**

c. Because it gives us a marvelous opportunity to learn His Word.

- **Psalm 119:71 - It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes.**

- affliction often brings us to the end of our knowledge base, and that is what frequently motivates to turn to the Scripture...the point is – just because something's hard, that doesn't mean it's bad...

d. Because we can demonstrate our trust for God as we follow Him through uncharted waters.

Proverbs 3:5-6 - Trust in the LORD with all your heart And do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He will make your paths straight.

- so you would agree with me that doing hard things is often very good for a follower of Christ?...
- great...then I'd say it's time to reach into bucket #1, wouldn't you? (of course you would)
- with that in mind, please open your Bible to II Corinthians chapter 1...
 - to understand what I just said about "bucket #1", let's quickly review the:

2. Five main emphases thus far in this series:

a. People tend to fall into one of two extremes when thinking about/discussing this topic:

- **The past is everything...**
- **The past is nothing...**

- we've tried to point out that both extremes are inconsistent with Scripture...
- "the past is everything crowd", who tend to only talk about this topic in the negative, need to see that...

b. Your past can be one of your best friends...we studied several significant ways that's true...you would not be better off without your past.

- but on the other hand, "the past is nothing folks" need to learn that...

c. Your past can be one of your worst enemies.

- if you have unfinished business with people or events in days gone by...that can really trip you up as you try to navigate life's challenges today...
- now, one of the questions that has been posed to me is – but aren't Christians supposed to be focused on today, and on the future, not on the past?...
 - only if we've handled the past properly...
 - for example, do you remember when Zaccheus became a follower of Christ?...he said to Jesus...

- Luke 19:8 - ...Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much.

- and apparently Jesus was very pleased with his answer, because how did He respond in the next verse?...

- Luke 19:9-10 - And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham. "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."

- not that Zaccheus was saved by making restitution to the people he had robbed in the past, but because that was evidence that he had truly come to Christ...he had some business in the past that had to be addressed – that's what restitution is...

- try writing on your electric bill the next time you get it – "I'm sorry but I'm a Christian and I don't live in the past, I used that electricity last month and I'm just focusing on what's happening today"...and won't the future be grand – not for you, unless you like the thought of starting a jail ministry from the inside...

- and by the way – the fact that someone would ask me a question like that is extremely helpful...I have a group of people who are reading rough drafts of the chapters of a book

I'm responsible to write on this subject, and their questions and their challenges are proving to be invaluable to this process...

- I've also been asked, didn't Paul say that he forgot the things which were behind him?...
- **Philippians 3:13-14 - Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of *it* yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what *lies* behind and reaching forward to what *lies* ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.**
- that's an important verse, but it has little to do with the series we're doing this summer, and here's why...the context of those verses is Paul's pedigree, or his reasons for boasting in himself...his heritage, his training...a whole list of resume items in his past in which he might be tempted to boast or place his confidence in...
- and he says in this great chapter – I don't want to be found in my own righteousness...the good things from my past...I want to be found in Him (in Christ)...and so in order to get there, I forget what lies behind and press on to greater growth in Christlikeness...
- so it is a very important concept, especially for those of us who lean toward self-righteousness...but it certainly does not cancel out the importance of dealing with unfinished business in the past...
- in fact, the book of Philippians itself is an attempt to do just that...
 - one of the reasons the book was written was because the member of their church, and also one of their leaders, a man named Epaphroditus who had delivered their love gift to Paul while he was in prison, became ill and had to return to Philippi...
 - some Bible teachers believe that some people in the church were saying that Epaphroditus was a quitter because he didn't stay and minister to Paul on their behalf...
 - and this book addresses that problem and gets it solved before it becomes a harmful part of their past...he explains that this man almost died trying to care for me...and now Paul says that he should be received back into the congregation joyfully and that they should hold men like that in high honor...
 - he's not going to let the possibility of gossip or unsolved problems undermine the effectiveness of this great church...
- now we've also tried to show how biblical theology (considering all God's Word says on a particular subject) allows us to organize or sort the past ...

d. Your past can be divided into four categories.

- and the way you get there mathematically is by posing two questions...

1) Was this particular event initiated by your own sin, or by the sin of someone else (or simply the pain of living in a sin cursed world)?...

- so are we talking about something from your innocent past...a time where you were sinned against, or your guilty past---a time when you sinned and that's what initiated the event?

2) How did you respond to what occurred?

- that's how you get from 2 to 4 buckets...
 - the innocent past where you responded well [David and Shimei]
 - the innocent past where you responded poorly [David and his wife Michal]
 - the guilty past where you responded well [David and Saul's robe in the cave]
 - the guilty past where you responded poorly [David and Bathsheba]...

e. In order to handle suffering well, you must have the right view of God and His Word.

- that brings us around to doing things that are hard...from II Corinthians 1 and related passages, we want to see...
- **3 challenging steps that must be taken to handle events in the innocent past when you, as far as you know, responded well....read II Corinthians 1:1-11...**

- Today we're talking about **Authentic Suffering – Reaching into Bucket #1.**
- the reason that some persons have trouble moving forward in their Christian life is because they were hurt, disappointed, abused or mistreated in some way and chose not to address such matters biblically...
- and as a result, they're bitter...they're numb...they're disconnected from God and other people...or there's a seething anger just underneath the surface...
- and I don't say that in some Freudian sense – I'm simply saying that their approach to suffering was/is something different than the approach advocated in God's Word...
- what can we learn from this passage and others about what a proper approach to suffering looks like?

I. Trust God Enough to Honestly Acknowledge Suffering.

A. A helpful definition.

Suffering . . . may conveniently be defined as *getting what you do not want while wanting what you do not get*. This definition covers all forms of loss, hurt, pain, grief, and weakness—all experiences of rejection, injustice, disappointment, discouragement, frustration, and being the butt of others' hatred, ridicule, cruelty, callousness, anger, and ill-treatment—plus all exposure to foul, sickening, and nightmarish things that make you want to scream, run, or even die. . . . *Ease is for heaven, not earth*. Life on earth is fundamentally out of shape and out of order by reason of sin. . . . So strains, pains, disappointments, traumas, and frustrations of all sorts await us in the future, just as they have overtaken us already in the past (J.I. Packer, *Rediscovering Holiness*, p. 249, 254).

- now, everyone of us has events that fits into this category from the past...
- we saw last week that one of Job's counselors rightly pointed out that - **Job 5:7 - For man is born for trouble, as sparks fly upward.**
- **John 16:33 - These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.**
- so the question isn't, have you suffered, or are you suffering?...the question is, did you suffer well?...has that event been put to rest...
- now, before answering quickly, please keep in mind that...

B. Our first response is not necessarily bad, but it is certainly incomplete.

- you've probably heard the name Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, a swiss psychiatrist who wrote the book *On Death and Dying*.
- based on her research, she developed a five-stage model of how men and women tend to process grief and loss and suffering...
- I'm not suggesting for a minute that we should base our approach to life on the latest research of any kind...
- however, sometimes the observations of the world can drive us to the Word of God...it fuels our theological work, some have said...
- the first stage Kubler-Ross and her team observed was denial...
 - that's the shock reaction...it can't be happening to me, this can't be true...a refusal to believe what is happening...
- we've all been there...in fact sometimes we react to bad news about someone else with the words..."you're kidding"...which is an incredibly bad response because usually we're talking about something that no one would think of kidding about...but we don't want to believe what we're hearing...

- some have suggested, simply as an observation outside of Scripture, that that might be a gift of God's grace to give our brains a moment to catch up with what the rest of us is experiencing...
- the problem is that some people stay there...(unlike Paul in this text)...
- but we need to understand that denial changes nothing, it just prolongs the inevitable...that's why...

C. The goal is not to avoid suffering, but to learn to suffer well.

- I came across a great quote this week that helps us put suffering in the right perspective...**There is no human experience which cannot be put on the anvil of a lively relationship with God and man, and battered into a meaningful shape (Frank Lake, Clinical Theology, p. 97).**
- see, if you cannot trust God enough to honestly acknowledge suffering, you will never get to the anvil...that event will never be battered into a meaningful shape...
- the apostle Paul gets that – he had no intention of living in denial...
 - v. 4 – in all our affliction
 - v. 5 – the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance
 - v. 6 – if we are afflicted
 - v. 6 – the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer
 - v. 7 you are sharers of our sufferings
 - v. 8 – we do not want you to be unaware brethren, of our affliction
 - v. 8 – we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life
 - v. 9 – we had the sentence of death within ourselves
- that is anything but denial...nor is it pasting some sort of glib smile on ones face as if everything is OK...
- and this is an important aspect of what reaching into bucket #1 looks like – when you've been abused, mistreated, or suffered in some way because of the sin-cursed world in which we live...acknowledging the pain and hurt of that is the kind of authenticity that characterizes the people of God...
- now, where does that lead?...is this some sort of an endless pity-party?...or some emotional crash to draw attention to self...
- for those who know Christ, it's that very kind of authenticity that often motivates a person to do what Paul did next...

II. Love God Enough to Cry Out to Him as You Suffer.

- what Kubler-Ross observed was that the next logical step was anger...
- she said that at that stage, resentment grows, "why me", "why my child", "this isn't fair", We direct blame toward God, others, and ourselves. We feel agitated, irritated, moody, on edge
- well, is that the way it has to be for a follower of Christ?...
- no, but a loving relationship puts you in a position to cry out to God...

A. When you feel abandoned by God.

- what should you do when you feel forsaken by God Himself?...
- is it appropriate to pray to Him and tell Him that very thing?...would we have biblical warrant to do that? - **Lamentations 5:20 - Why do You forget us forever? Why do You forsake us so long?**
- I'm rushing for sake of time, but there are all sorts of examples like that in Scripture, of godly people--not in hateful anger, but in loving authenticity—pouring out their hearts to the Lord...

- now, I can just hear someone say, I thought we weren't supposed to live by our feelings?...
- I think we have way overplayed that card...it is true that the way we feel should not be the final arbiter in any decision we're making...
- it's also true that we can live by our feelings instead of living by the principles of Scripture...
- but part of being made in the image of God is possessing the capacity to feel, and to feel deeply...

B. When you feel betrayed by others.

- **Psalm 55:12-14 - For it is not an enemy who reproaches me, Then I could bear *it*; Nor is it one who hates me who has exalted himself against me, Then I could hide myself from him. But it is you, a man my equal, My companion and my familiar friend; We who had sweet fellowship together Walked in the house of God in the throng.**
- many times what makes the suffering so painful is that it comes at the hand of someone you thought was your friend, or whom you thought loved you...
- that was certainly true of what is occurring in the Corinthian church...
- this isn't just generalized suffering that Paul is alluding to, and everyone in the church would have known that because of their history and also what's about to come in the rest of the letter...
- false teachers had tried to undermine Paul and his teachings and some of the people in the Corinthian church who had formerly followed Paul had now rejected him...and were joining in on the gossip...
- we ought to love God and love others enough to cry out about that...not to ignore it or try to act as if it's not occurring...

C. When you loathe yourself and your existence.

- **Job 10:1 - I loathe my own life; I will give full vent to my complaint; I will speak in the bitterness of my soul.**
- **Job 17:11 - My days are past, my plans are torn apart, *Even* the wishes of my heart.**
- you might say – why in the world would I ever want to even take such things out of this bucket?...
- please think about this – some people grew up in homes where they were fed a steady diet of “you're stupid”, “you're ugly”, “you're fat”, “you're wicked”, “you're never going to amount to anything”, “no one's ever going to love you”, “no one's ever going to want you...”
- over time, will that affect the way a person thinks about him/herself?...
- and if those kinds of habitual thoughts are never acknowledged and evaluated and then brought to the throne for divine cleansing...that is unfinished business is there ever was unfinished business...
- and we're certainly not suggesting that we replace all of that with worldly self-love which just becomes another kind of problem...I'm saying that we have to learn to think biblical about ourselves...the way God chooses to think about us and encourages us in a vast number of places in Scripture to think about ourselves...but if you aren't willing to cry out to Him, there's no possibility of having those wrong patterns of thinking corrected and cleansed...

- now, we probably need to insert this disclaimer...we're talking about crying out to God...

D. Without disrespectful complaint.

- Job 2:9 - Then his wife said to him, “Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die!”
- the children of Israel often displeased God because of their complaining...
- there is a world of difference between respectfully crying out to God and disrespectfully complaining about Him...

- but what would motivate a person to love God enough to cry out to Him?...

E. Because you believe God has purpose(s) and answers for you.

- what did Paul find God to be as he processes his afflictions with honesty and authenticity?

1. Paul

- v. 3 – the Father of mercies and God of all comfort.
- you cannot learn that fully apart from suffering...
- I’ve mentioned my friend Bob Kelleman a couple of times recently because he’s writing a book on suffering and he’s asked me to write the foreword, so I have an advance draft...I think this book is going to be a great help to many of us when it’s published...
- **To deny or diminish suffering is to refuse arrogantly to be humbled. It is to reject dependence upon God. Moses chastises God’s people in Deuteronomy 8:1-10 for forgetting their past suffering. God wants us to make use of our suffering, to remember our suffering, to admit our need for Him in our suffering, and to rehearse our suffering...before Him.**
- Kubler-Ross’ 3rd and 4th stages are bargaining (trying to make agreements with God) and then depression...what we’re seeing here is so much better than that...crying out to God is demonstrating honesty about our situation, and honesty about our own resources...that puts us in the perfect position to turn to Him...

2. Terry Waite.

- do you remember Terry Waite, the British man who was a hostage in Beirut for 1460 days...
- **I have been determined in captivity, and still am determined, to convert this experience into something that will be useful and good for other people. I think that’s the way to approach suffering. It seems to me that Christianity doesn’t in any way lessen suffering. What it does is enable you to take it, to face it, to work through it and eventually convert it (Terry Waite, Taken on Trust, p. 37)**

- thankfully, the crying out is not the end of the process...

III. Follow God Enough to Find Comfort in Him.

A. Much more than worldly acceptance and resignation.

- that’s Kubler-Ross’ final stage...face the loss and try to go on...
- what we find at the end of the rope of suffering is a God who chooses to comfort...

B. Definition of comfort.

Originally, comfort meant *co-fortitude*—being fortified by the strength of another... Comfort *experiences the presence of God in the presence of suffering—a presence that empowers me to survive scars and plants the seed of hope that I will yet thrive*

C. Embracing Christ's sufferings so that we can receive Christ's comfort.

- 2 Corinthians 1:5 - For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ.
- St. Augustine – God wants to give us something, but cannot, because our hands are full—there is nowhere for Him to put it.

D. Learning to not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead.

- 2 Corinthians 1:9 - indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead;
- that's what we mean by following Him...suffering, rightly handled, puts us in a marvelous position to do just that...

- this is not written from a Christian perspective per se, but it is a great example of what following God in the midst of intense suffering looks like...

"It never occurred to me to question God's doings or lack of doings while I was an inmate of Auschwitz, although of course I understand others did...I was no less or no more religious because of what the Nazis did to us; and I believe my faith in God was not undermined in the least. It never occurred to me to associate the calamity we were experiencing with God, to blame Him, or to believe in Him less or cease believing in Him at all because He didn't come to our aid. God doesn't owe us that, or anything. We owe our lives to Him. If someone believes God is responsible for the death of six million because He didn't somehow do something to save them, he's got his thinking reversed. We owe God our lives for the few or many years we live, and we have the duty to worship Him and do as He commands us. That's what we're here on earth for, to be in God's service, to do God's bidding."

(Brenner, *The Faith and Doubt of Holocaust Survivors*)

E. Rejoicing that we can share God's comfort with fellow sufferers.

- 2 Corinthians 1:4 - who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

F. Developing endurance for today and hope for tomorrow.

- 2 Corinthians 1:10 - who delivered us from so great a *peril of death*, and will deliver *us*, He on whom we have set our hope. And He will yet deliver us,

Apply – any unfinished business from your innocent past?

- have you suffered well? (like the apostle Paul?)
- or is there bitterness, anger, despair?....