

# SHALL BE BRIGHT AT LAST

*Reflections on Suffering and Hope in the Letters  
of Paul*

**Nijay K. Gupta and Martha Byrne  
Van Houten**

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Our deepest and most sincere hope is that readers will find peace amidst the many challenges in life and trust the triune God who can turn suffering into character and hope—and Christian hope does not disappoint (Rom 5:3-4).

## INTRODUCTION

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### NIJAY K. GUPTA

“It’s utterly impossible for me to build my life on a foundation of chaos, suffering, and death. I see the world being slowly transformed into a wilderness, I hear the approaching thunder that, one day, will destroy us, too; I feel the suffering of millions. And yet, when I look up at the sky, I somehow feel that everything will change for the better. That is, cruelty, too, will end, that peace and tranquility will return once more. In the meantime, I must hold on to my ideals.” —Anne Frank <sup>1</sup>

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” —Paul (2 Corinthians 4:17)

“Do not be afraid...he has risen.” —An angel by the tomb (Matthew 28:7-8)

I have thought about re-working that famous little phrase *to err is human, to forgive, divine*. The original is true, of course, but there are many other ways we could think about the human-divine dynamic. For example, one might say: *to suffer is human, to hope, divine*. Suffering and pain are experiences that all humans share. They come in all shapes and sizes—work problems, relationship troubles, sickness, bereavement, feeling rejected, regrets, fears—but they still give us a common feeling that the world is not the way it should be. So we can dream of a better world, as

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Anne Frank did. But Christians are in a unique position to reorient their experiences and thoughts about suffering around the hope of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Despair and fear can give way to faith, hope, and love. Anxiety and apathy can be replaced by peace and joy. But for Christians, *hope* is not activated by a magic wand or hidden button. Hope is less a feeling and more so a muscle that has to be exercised and put to work in order to grow stronger.

These nine essays on suffering and hope are best understood from that perspective. This book is not a definitive “solution” to the problem of suffering. It offers exercises in Christian hope. The contributors reveal honest and tender wounds of the many harsh realities of life in a broken world awaiting full redemption. They meditate on Paul’s holy words that teach us to pray with expectation and live by faith. They encourage fellow pilgrims to trust the path and stick together.

The title of this book comes from my favorite hymn: *Be Still, My Soul*. This hymn is about hope and faith when you feel like you are drowning in sorrow. I encourage anyone not familiar with this beautiful song to read all of the stanzas.<sup>2</sup>

Here I simply offer one stanza that has helped me through many difficult seasons, and which serves as a nice summary of this book.

Be still my soul; thy God doth undertake  
To guide the future as He has the past.  
Thy hope, thy confidence, let nothing shake;  
All now mysterious shall be bright at last.  
Be still, my soul; the waves and winds still know  
His voice who ruled them while He dwelt below

## Notes

1. Menno Metselaar and Ruud van der Rol, *Anne Frank: Her Life in Words and Pictures* (New York: Roaring Brook Press, 2004), 159.
2. [https://hymnary.org/text/  
be\\_still\\_my\\_soul\\_the\\_lord\\_is\\_on\\_thy\\_side](https://hymnary.org/text/be_still_my_soul_the_lord_is_on_thy_side).

## CHAPTER 1.

### PEACE AND UNSURPASSABLE LOVE

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#### ROMANS 5:1-11

#### SARAH SWARTZENDRUBER

*Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,<sup>2</sup> through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.<sup>3</sup> Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance;<sup>4</sup> perseverance, character; and character, hope.<sup>5</sup> And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.<sup>6</sup> You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.<sup>7</sup> Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die.<sup>8</sup> But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.<sup>9</sup> Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!<sup>10</sup> For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!<sup>11</sup> Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. ~ Romans 5:1-11 (NIV)*

## INTRODUCTION

In the summer of July 2006, I was with my mom and older sister, Beth, at New Seasons in Hillsboro, Oregon. Being a sophomore in high school, I had just returned from a week-long mission trip and was still exhausted from volunteering in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. My mom and Beth decided it would be best to go in and grab groceries; I opted to sit in the car and take a nap. While in the car, I was suddenly awoken by the loud buzzing of an engine. To my amazement, as I looked out the window, I watched a small airplane drop out of the sky and into the neighborhood next to the parking lot.

Time slowed down as I watched the crash scene. The plane had missed nearly everything, except one house, which immediately lit into flames. People began running out of New Seasons, abandoning shopping carts throughout the parking lot. Some onlookers called 911, while others ran towards the flames, warning each other that the engine might explode. I heard screaming from family members attempting to find one another outside the store, as well as families from the neighborhood surrounding the house in flames as they evacuated. Soon, I was comforted by the sound of sirens as professionals arrived. I jumped out of the car, unsure of where to go, but determined to find the ones I loved most, my mom and sister, because discerning the unknown together seemed easier than alone.

This memory of the plane crashing is the way I have felt when entering seasons of pain and suffering. I will never forget the moment when I found out my dad had a brain tumor. I felt as if a plane had crashed in my gut, and I was left trying to make sense of the chaos of life in the following months and years through multiple surgeries and treatments, clinging to the ones I loved as I desperately tried to make sense of the crash site before me.

Suffering leads humanity to the same few questions: *Why me? God, do you still love me in this suffering? How long will the suffering last?* These are all questions that each of us ask in our suffering,

no matter the time, circumstance, or our cultural background.<sup>1</sup> Suffering creates chaos, and Romans 5:1-11 addresses this moment of chaos by blessing the reader with a message of love and understanding.

## SCRIPTURE

Paul wrote 16 chapters to the Romans without having known or visited the Roman church before. Yet, Romans can also be read as one of the fullest representations of Paul's work, despite having ultimately been written to "strangers." The specific purpose of the letter is unknown, but it can be deduced that Paul sensed a need to give pastoral counseling to this hurting community, to remind the community of their mission and purpose in Jesus Christ, and also to reinforce some essential theology to this community.

Romans 5:1-11 is a complex text that can be broken down into two parts: verses 1-5 (where Paul addresses hope in suffering) and verses 6-11 (where Paul talks about hope being grounded in Christ).<sup>2</sup> These two main movements bridge Paul's writing to the greater letter and context of Romans.<sup>3</sup>

In the first 3 verses, Paul presents three blessings the believer can count on during suffering: (1) having peace with God; (2) having access to faith through grace; and (3) having hope in the glory of God through suffering.<sup>4</sup> Peace with God is the first blessing in suffering; it is based on the concept of Jesus dying on the cross as the grounds for peace. Paul's understanding of "peace" goes back to the Old Testament (Hebrew) definition of *shalom* as a fulfillment of covenantal promises, which was originally for Israel and now expanded to Gentiles (as Paul addresses earlier in the letter).<sup>5</sup> To a community who had and would continue to endure hardship, this concept of well-being, wholeness, and intimate relationship with God and with neighboring communities would have been culturally desirable.<sup>6</sup> The *shalom* that Paul is addressing is not that of a specific sensation or euphoric feeling as a modern reader may assume; instead, it is a condition

in which we can live a life that is “best lived.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, the *shalom* promised in this passage is not feelings-based or one free from adversity; after all, difficult circumstances are not what threatens the believer’s feeling of peace with God.<sup>8</sup> Instead, this peace appears to be granted because of the life and work of Jesus.<sup>9</sup> The first representation of God’s love comes to humanity through this blessing and promise of peace that surpasses any “feeling” amidst suffering.

The second blessing is that of having access to faith through grace (Rom 5:2). As in the first blessing of peace, God is present in this blessing of grace to all of humanity within its suffering. While it doesn’t appear to be a choice whether one handles their suffering gracefully or not, it similarly is not a choice to have this continual “virtue of grace” flowing from God.

The third blessing (Rom 5:3) promises that when one hopes, perseverance and character will result. Perseverance is the first clue as to how afflictions are to produce endurance, since those in trouble appear to be conditioned like an athlete who must endure training for a marathon. While, to the modern Western reader, this may be an odd concept, it would have resonated with much of Greco-Roman and Jewish thought, in which suffering was considered a necessary step in the believers’ development of character.<sup>10</sup> While suffering is not meant to punish *per se*, it does allow one to continue in this direction of movement—approaching future hardship with remembrance of the pain experienced in the past. On the day my dad was diagnosed with a brain tumor, as difficult as it was, I trusted that one day, this too would be a scar instead of a deep wound in my own understanding of life.

But why does Paul use the word “boast” in regards to the suffering (Rom 5:2b)? This may relate to the persecution of early Christians. In the Greco-Roman mindset, “hope” was possible in the future (but not certain); but Paul was writing with certainty and with the Holy Spirit as the proof of God’s gracious redemption and vindication.<sup>11</sup> “The hope that will not put us to shame” (5:5) directly juxtaposes the “glory” (5:2-3) that Paul describes in

5:2-3.<sup>12</sup> It appears that Paul is restoring honor in a culture that regularly experienced shame because of their association with Jesus Christ.

The second section, verses 6-11, focuses on why humanity can trust the hope found in suffering. Romans 5:1 is retold with an emphasis on the gospel's purpose to all of life. Paul states that Jesus died for the ungodly, sinners, and enemies. This verse reveals what could be Paul's own view on humanity.<sup>13</sup> Verses 6-8 provide some of the most profound descriptions of divine love that readers find within Scripture: Paul's understanding of Jesus, and his own challenge as he faces death like his fellow apostles.<sup>14</sup> While verse 7 could be a repetitive over-clarification of his point of the significance of Jesus' death, it appears that Paul's processing of dying for another comes through the text in an emotively new way.<sup>15</sup>

Verses 6-11 are a reaffirmation of what it means to "boast in God" and not just "boast in our sufferings" as is referred to in 1-5.<sup>16</sup> Verse 11 ends with the significance of boasting in God with an emphasis on reconciliation. Paul's explanation of what the boasting entails is threefold. First, Paul is confident that God will reconcile the world for believers through an understanding of Jesus' self-giving death.<sup>17</sup> Second, there is hope for glory outside of the current state of suffering that the believing Romans may find themselves in. Third, hope comes from identifying with the crucified Christ. These are clear and fresh perspectives on the boasting that Paul speaks to.<sup>18</sup> Here Paul is building himself a bridge to Chapters 6 and 7, where he will explain that God is in a two-fold relationship with us, doing something for us and with us.

## REFLECTION

In high school, my sister struggled with severe mental health issues. Beth, at 18 years old, was fighting to believe there was reason to live. I watched as she struggled to find the correct dosage of medications with scary side effects, weighed out the portions

of food required by her eating disorder program, and found new alternatives to self-destructive habits. As her best friend, watching my sister survive felt like watching someone being dragged to a living hell and back daily. My family had always been church attenders, but it felt like the church failed to put proper language to the suffering my sister was experiencing. I dreaded attending church when the easy explanation of my fellow congregants felt so unsustainable and theologically unsound to my sixteen-year-old self. Lines such as, “it’s God’s plan” or “God’s got this” felt inadequate to the severity of Beth’s day-to-day fight to live.

As a 16-year-old, I regularly asked God why he wanted to see my sister struggle. I begged in my nighttime prayers for her to feel better, to know that she would make it to my own wedding or the birth of my own children. At such a young age, the pain of losing my sister felt unbearable. Was God comfortable with the pain that was being inflicted on my family’s life? Was her illness meant to build perseverance and character as Romans 5 suggests? Or, in fact, had Jesus been weeping alongside us throughout her illness and we had been asking the wrong questions all along?

Reading Romans 5:1-11, one can almost find in Paul’s words what seems to be formulaic martyrdom of the Christian life. One could interpret Paul as saying, “Christianity = suffering” and “hope+faith+grace+perseverance = the Christian life.” Following this formula reinforces a “grin-and-bear-it” message, in which Christians are reflected as being masochists, people who rejoice in their pain and invite suffering as “God’s plan.” Instead, I would argue, this text reveals not an evil God who is standing above humanity as a puppeteer (forcing humans into suffering in order to teach them to endure), but a God who pours out his love for us uncontrollably. This love is from God—love that is lavished, like the gushing of rain in arid climates. Romans 5 is not a guilt-inducing reminder of “because God did this...” therefore, “...we are this.” But instead, Paul’s words are written with the utmost

love. Love dancing through the rain in the hot desert. A promise of “beloved, you are not forgotten.”

Reading this passage in that light, specific words leap out of the text: peace, grace, faith, hope, glory, perseverance, character, love, boast, reconciliation—words full of nuance and purpose that provide reassurance rather than shame. While there is pressure from Paul towards formation, it comes out of a reflection of God’s love and the promise and guarantee of how that love will be carried out for humankind, based on the love of God in the past.<sup>19</sup> In the past month, I’ve read this passage over and over, searched and sought for an explanation or understanding of suffering that was deeper. I interviewed friends to hear their thoughts on this passage, led a small group over it, talked to congregants amidst their present suffering. I cried, wrestled, walked, and prayed; I continuously desired something besides “Jesus died on the cross, and therefore, he understands you in your suffering” (i.e., “God’s got this”). While these statements are not completely “wrong,” I find them all too often shallow and unsatisfying amid the suffering that I have experienced or watched. So, what do I think Paul wants the reader to know about suffering after reading Romans 5:1-11?

First, suffering isn’t always because of something the person did wrong *per se*, just as Jesus didn’t “deserve” his suffering. Suffering and sin are not always linked. My dad doesn’t have a brain tumor because of generational sin. He is a good man who loves others deeply and also, whether due to the increase of carcinogens or happenstance, happens to have a tumor in his brain. My sister wasn’t depressed because God forgot about my sister. She was depressed because of a complicated change in brain chemistry we may never fully understand.

So, if sin isn’t the cause of suffering, what is? Suffering appears to be a universal trait of humanity that comes as all of our bodies move toward disintegration, or dust, while the earth moves toward regeneration and life. Imagine our bodies as a wheel that moves in a forward direction toward disintegration—bodies age,

die, and will return to the dust from which we were formed. Going the opposite way is the wheel that represents regeneration and life. While humanity is moving toward dust, the ground in which we are being put into is moving toward life.

The second thing to know is that suffering does occur because of brokenness or separation from God, which is a part of the world we live in. While suffering is not a result of sin, that does not mean that brokenness does not exist within our world. The disintegration that the Romans were experiencing reflected the life-or-death stakes of their faith in Jesus Christ, far beyond the religious persecution most Americans experience today.

Today we see this brokenness in many forms, whether it is through terminal diseases, the untimely loss of children or loved ones, school shootings, racism, sexism, etc. The suffering that Paul discusses here is addressed to a specific community, but the love that Paul describes transcends time and cultural context. Within these moments of brokenness, God promises to be right beside us through the Holy Spirit, a presence of love that transcends all of human reality. While brokenness exists, so does God—a message within our suffering that there is something bigger than what the eye can see. He is a presence that gives peace amid the most tragic of moments. He is a God who weeps with us in utter despair and hopelessness.

## CONCLUSION

Last summer, after a student set off an illegal firework, a forest fire raged through the Columbia Gorge and wiped out about 1,000 acres of forest damage. As the fire burned acre after acre and firefighters fought through day and night, many wondered, *will Oregon ever be the same without the beautiful, green Gorge? Will famous landmarks like Multnomah Falls outlive this tragedy? Can the land continue to suffer such brutality and carelessness?* While it was a tragic act done by humanity, it has been a constant reminder to me in my own suffering of the promise of Jesus Christ. At times it feels like our lives are in a constant state of fury and

chaos—the plane may be on fire, your dad may be undergoing his fourth brain surgery, or your sister may be negotiating mental illness. Jesus didn't promise us a life free of suffering, but he did promise us blessings of peace, grace, and overwhelming love so that when all else feels as though it's returning to dust, the promise of regeneration and new life in the forest is near—with a soft whisper of, "Beloved, you are never alone. I'm right here beside you."

## Notes

1. Ann L. Jervis, *At the Heart of the Gospel: Suffering in the Earliest Christian Message* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 7.
2. James Edwards, *Romans*, NIBC (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1992), 132.
3. Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 16.
4. Schreiner, *Romans*, 54.
5. Schreiner, *Romans*, 54, 253.
6. Siu Fung Wu, *Suffering in Romans* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2016), 57.
7. Edwards, *Romans*, 134.
8. Edwards, *Romans*, 134.
9. Simon Gathercole, *Where Is Boasting? Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul's Response in Romans 1-5* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 256.
10. Wu, *Suffering in Romans*, 58.
11. Edwards, *Romans*, 137.
12. Edwards, *Romans*, 58.
13. Stuart Briscoe, *Romans* (Waco: Word, 1982), 115.
14. Edwards, *Romans*, 139.
15. Edwards, *Romans*, 140.
16. Gathercole, *Where Is Boasting?*, 259.
17. Wu, *Suffering in Romans*, 62.
18. Wu, *Suffering in Romans*, 63.
19. Gathercole, *Where Is Boasting?*, 258.

## CHAPTER 2.

# GROANING IN CHORUS: NEVER SUFFERING ALONE

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## ROMANS 8:15-24

### ALEC WARD

*For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!”<sup>16</sup> The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,<sup>17</sup> and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.<sup>18</sup> For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.<sup>19</sup> For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.<sup>20</sup> For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope<sup>21</sup> that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.<sup>22</sup> For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.<sup>23</sup> And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.<sup>24</sup> For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. ~ Romans 8:15-24 (ESV)*

## INTRODUCTION

Late last summer I intended to spend the final two weeks of my break before seminary directly by the pool. I had nowhere to go, nowhere to be, except by the pool. It was my calling, of sorts. In our small apartment complex, each tenant and family shares a nice, yet small, pool in the courtyard. Each summer day as I leave for work, I'm *still* tempted to spend a few minutes (or hours) dipping in the saltwater. Everyone else seems to be having such a fun time! Why can't I just spend my day there?

One Saturday afternoon at the pool with my wife, reflecting on another successful week absorbing too much Vitamin D, I squinted through my sunglasses to see some of our louder neighbors stomping their way toward our pool. I'm sure I rolled my eyes anticipating the disruption of peace coming for our tiny pool. As our neighbors got settled in their pool chairs, I heard splashes one-by-one of cannonballs, followed by pool water gently sprayed on my face. My peace was *officially* disrupted.

My wife, who is much more gracious than I am, soon befriended one of our neighbors in the pool. Her name is Tonya. As it turns out, Tonya is very social, not afraid to disclose the intimate details of her life at all, and has Down syndrome. My wife asked about her family, only to discover both of her parents have passed away and she is now in a government-funded program to house those with special needs in our area. Her story of pain and heartache shared in a childlike voice seemed to be an irony undeserved.

Through the rest of the conversation my wife tried to focus on Tonya's present circumstances, but she couldn't help but respond to the more difficult parts of Tonya's life. Following the culturally appropriate, "I'm sorry!" from my wife, I heard a surprising joy leap from Tonya's voice in response: "It's okay now! I'm never alone."

## SCRIPTURE

The eighth chapter of Romans is one many consider to be a favorite. With verses like, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,” and “For I am sure that neither death nor life...nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord,” I would have to agree! And there is so much more! Often this chapter of Romans is also credited with being all about the Holy Spirit. While all of these things are certainly true about Romans, I sometimes have difficulty connecting with them. Though I wish this weren’t necessarily true, I don’t roll out of bed every morning shouting, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?!” (Romans 8:35). Instead, my mind rushes with all of those things I seem to believe could separate me from Christ. More often than not those things hold too much weight in my thoughts.

I think there is another underlying theme in Romans 8 that does not seem to be talked about enough. Luckily, this theme is something I *do* feel like I can connect with on a regular basis: suffering. While suffering may not be the main idea in Romans 8, it is certainly the context and setting from which Romans 8:15–24 is born. From this context of suffering, Paul is inviting every reader to bear their circumstances and face the challenge with hope.

### **What is Suffering?**

Romans 8:17 promises that Christians will be glorified, “provided we suffer with [Christ].” I think this verse summarizes an idea from Paul that is crucial to understanding suffering in the Christian faith: suffering is assumed and necessary. Do you feel like suffering is assumed and necessary in your own life? If not, it seems like this verse questions the realities of future glory with Christ. We must suffer in some way.

Before moving on, I wonder if we are too narrow in our definitions of suffering. Do you feel like you suffer? We usually think

of people who are suffering in ways worse than our own, instead of accepting what really feels like suffering. When this happens, it is natural to assume, “I’m not suffering...” But Paul reminds us that suffering comes in all shapes and sizes.

To consider the people that Paul was writing to in Rome at the time, we can know they were facing several issues that could have certainly caused suffering among them. At the very least, the audience was going through their own racial, ethnic, and preferential tensions between Jew and Gentile that were causing division and suffering, even within their own congregation. Sometimes suffering is caused by other Christians.

Maybe right now you are really desiring something (or *somewhere*) in life, and even with good, honest intentions you just can’t seem to get there. Does it feel like something is hindering you from that? Paul shares this same sentiment with his readers in Romans 1:13. Paul desired to see the church in Rome, but he was unable to at this point. Sometimes suffering is caused by our unfulfilled desires.

Quoting Psalm 44, Paul reminds his current readers that their own suffering is not a new experience for God’s people. This is an experience long understood by many different people. Romans 8:35 seems to assume that “tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword” were a reality, or at least a potential reality, for the Roman believers. It could be a reality in your own life too. Sometimes suffering is caused by our circumstances and those around us.

### **Suffering in Context**

While suffering may be an assumed experience in the life of all people, Romans 8:15 reminds the Christian that the “spirit of adoption” is a present reality for all who belong to God. Additionally, the verse reminds us of where we have come from as people who have once lived in a life of sin, slavery, and fear. That was our past. But the present reality is a life of intimacy

with God. This life with God is so close, that we can cry “Abba! Father!”

A life of intimacy with God does not just stop at that intimacy, however. Romans 8:17 includes a metaphor similar to that of a royal family, identifying children not only by their current close relationship with their mother or father, but also remembering their *future* status as kings or queens themselves. Yes, someone in Christ has a uniquely close relationship to the Father in the middle of their suffering, but they also have the hope that their future status will be one of ruling over that circumstance. In all of these things, Christ is the forerunner and the exemplar, providing us with the path of endurance and hope through our suffering.

Next, Romans 8:19 introduces to the reader that perhaps humans are not the only ones waiting in agony for the future hope of Christ’s reign. In reality, there is a universal, cosmological element to suffering. Not only is it assumed that each human person will interact with suffering at some point, it is assumed that *all* creation, person or not, will interact with suffering. This certainly broadens the effects of sin and suffering, but it simultaneously broadens the scope of anticipation and the depth of hope that Christ brings and will bring to this fallen world.

Lastly, understanding that creation is experiencing suffering also calls forth interaction between humanity and creation. Romans 8:20 reminds the reader that it is not creation that causes humanity to suffer, but humanity has caused creation to suffer. In the suffering that we experience, it would do us well to remember the others who are experiencing suffering at our hands as well.

What is one to do with this seemingly bleak outlook? If suffering is assumed and a necessary part of life, even the life of creation, is there any hope of a different reality? This is the question with which Romans 8:15–24 ends. It is with this question that Paul and the book of Romans prompts the reader toward further reflection on suffering in the life of the Christian.

## REFLECTION

Since Romans 8:15–24 is so centered on hope in the end reality of Christ’s resurrection, let me go ahead and spoil my ending here as well! Christians do not have to suffer alone. This is the way in which believers in Christ can become more than *just* believers, but can become ones who *hope* in Christ. They are sustained by experiencing suffering in community at a variety of levels.

First, the suffering Christian has the example and the nearness of Christ to identify with in their trial. Romans 8:15 not only presents the intimacy of the believer as a child with the Father, but the prayer of “Abba! Father!” also draws a theological parallel between the suffering Christian and the suffering Christ. Just as Jesus cried out to God with this level of intimacy, the Christian is actually tied into the intimacy between Christ and the Father. However, it is no mistake that this level of intimacy is reached in the context of the Garden in Gethsemane. Paul could have used so many other images of Christ to portray the intimacy between Son and Father, yet he chose Jesus’ most difficult hour of suffering to encourage the Christians of their identity while enduring their own suffering. Christ is with you while you pray in your own hour of suffering in the Garden. And like him, you will be glorified with him as you suffer with him. Christians do not suffer alone.

Second, a character that is present throughout Romans 8 is the person of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is in the background of every part of this section on suffering. Who is the one that bears witness to our status as children and also as heirs? The Holy Spirit. Who is the one that connects us to Christ, provided we suffer with him and are glorified with him? The Holy Spirit. Who is the one that provides the way for us to groan alongside creation? The Holy Spirit. In every part of our suffering, the Holy Spirit is present, both to comfort with us, suffer with us, and connect us with one another. Christians do not suffer alone.

Third, Paul uses suffering in a unique way in Romans 8:15–24 to promote unity between Jew and Gentile and to promote unity between the original reader and the contemporary reader. This section reminds us that suffering helps create unity. One way this happens is that unity occurs at a relational level between other people in the church. It does not matter what your circumstances say about you, suffering feels similar to all. It doesn't matter your ethnicity or your social class, suffering feels similar. However, whenever you are feeling estranged and separated from others, remember that the cause of your insecurity could be the very same cause that reminds you of your interconnectedness in Christ. Use your suffering to remember those who suffer all around the world. Then, compassion and empathy for one another grows and we are on a level playing field. When the body of Christ understands their differences but is willing to see how their suffering unites them – Christians do not suffer alone.

### **Hope in Context**

If the church can truly live out this reality of suffering well *together*, then the church can bring hope to the whole world. It is “in this hope we were saved” (Romans 8:24) and it is that *same* hope that will save the world in Christ Jesus. Because of the hope and joy that Christians experience, because of the unity in Christ that Christians experience when they suffer, there is tension with the world outside of Christ in which many do not know *how* to suffer. It is the hope demonstrated by the church, the hope which *saves* us, that the world needs. They are suffering too. Aren't we all? Suffering is the given circumstance of human existence. But what is different between those in Christ and those outside Christ? The hope with which we suffer.

I was reminded recently of a story from a catastrophe that my city of Joplin, Missouri experienced on May 22, 2011. That evening, one of the largest tornadoes, and the costliest tornado in American history, killed 158 of our community members and injured over 1,000 people. The tornado seemed to appear out of

nowhere, undeserved, violent, and reckless. Suffering was rampant in the city and people were as desperate for hope as they were for a bottle of clean water.

During the clean-up and initial relief efforts, churches, government agencies, city workers, volunteers, non-profit organizations, everyone was on the front lines doing what they could to help with whatever they could find. A friend of mine tells a story that has stuck with him through all of the other strong memories from that season of life.

One afternoon he was taking a break from his work and sitting down at a relief center. After a few minutes at the table, an exhausted broken firefighter sat down across from my friend, sitting in a somber silence. With no previous conversation, the firefighter shook his head in disbelief, exclaiming, “The [expletive] church, man...They’re out here getting it [expletive] done...Without the church, I don’t know what the [expletive] we would do.”

While those brief remarks are certainly shocking, shouldn’t the church always have this sort of impact on our communities in suffering? Shouldn’t people who are *not* a part of the body of Christ be completely shocked at the way that those in Christ seem to absorb suffering and provide hope? Christ invites each and every Christian into this kind of shocking and desperate mission of providing hope to those in and out of the body of Christ who are experiencing suffering. But we are never alone in our own suffering and they are never alone in theirs!

## CONCLUSION

If you’re experiencing suffering, you are never alone. Even in your own Garden of Gethsemane, before your greatest hour of need, when it *feels* like you are all alone, the Holy Spirit is present, connecting you to Christ, and those within his church. It is this reality paired with the future reality that believers *will* experience that cultivates the seeds of hope planted within us. We need to understand both realities well. Then, when that hope is experienced, share your story and your pain with others! Some may

not understand the depths of the pain you have known, but share your story anyway. Let hope begin to rise, let empathy increase, and let compassion spread because of the hope you now know in Christ. As this journey is walked through pain and suffering, then perhaps even more can come to be in Christ and continue the mission of spreading love, peace, and hope to those who find themselves in the midst of the sufferings of life. We all have them! Just remember, like Tonya so graciously reminded me on that summer afternoon, "I'm never alone!"

## CHAPTER 3.

### IN THIS HOPE

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#### ROMANS 8:25-39

#### MARTHA EKHOFF

*For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? <sup>25</sup> But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. <sup>26</sup> Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. <sup>27</sup> And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. <sup>28</sup> And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup> For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. <sup>30</sup> And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. <sup>31</sup> What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? <sup>33</sup> Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. <sup>34</sup> Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for*

us. <sup>35</sup> *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?*

<sup>36</sup> *As it is written,*

*“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;*

*we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”*

<sup>37</sup> *No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup> For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup> nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. ~ Romans 8:24-29 (NRSV)*

## INTRODUCTION

Romans 8:24-39 offers one of the greatest and most important messages of love and hope that the apostle Paul presented to the Roman Christians, and it is still one of the greatest messages for our world today. Paul declares the everlasting, indestructible, and incorruptible love of God for everyone.

Before turning to Paul and ancient Rome, I would like to talk about my husband Jerry. Jerry loved Jesus and he couldn't wait until he could meet him face-to-face. He lived his life in anticipation of that day. In 2011, Jerry was diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS). Before proceeding, let me share a snapshot of Jerry before ALS. Jerry was a marathon runner, a mountain biker, and an avid snowboarder. Even in his early sixties Jerry could train to run a marathon in two months. He ran inspired by the words of Eric Liddell, the Scottish Olympic Gold Medal runner, which he carried in his heart and head, “When I run, I feel His (God's) pleasure.”

Jerry shared with me that in the initial stages of his disease, when he would fall and wasn't able to get right back up, he'd lie on the floor and say to God, “You must have something you want to say to me. Well I'm going to be here for a while and I am listen-

ing.” This wasn’t Jerry’s way of denying the reality of his illness; this was his desire to be present to God. I remember another time Jerry shared that he asked God if there would be a way of knowing his death was close—*would there be angels at the foot of his bed? Would he hear God calling him?* I asked him if God answered his question and he said, “Nope, I’m not at that place yet.” Jerry anticipated every single day with the hope that it was the day he would meet Jesus face-to-face.

Jerry’s illness was hard. It was hard to watch the vibrancy of life move from his body. He struggled to breathe, he struggled to not grow weary of life because it hurt, he struggled with losing bodily functions and it made him as helpless as a newborn baby. But there was so much truth he lived daily. He had a joy that only the Spirit of God abiding in him could have given and he recognized that absolutely nothing could or would separate him from the relentless and overwhelming love of God.

Jerry’s disease brought our family together—literally. My daughter moved back to Boise with her family, my youngest son quit his job to be Jerry’s full-time caregiver, my son-in-law became his part-time caregiver as did my other son, and my daughter-in-law also shared in the night shifts we shared by his side. My oldest daughter shared with me that Jerry’s illness healed and restored our family, and for that she could say God’s purposes worked for our good.

## SCRIPTURE

Romans 8:24 declares that in hope we were saved. Notice that this short statement utilizes “were” as a past event. As Christians we can hold to this statement because Jesus in his life, death, and resurrection made salvation a reality for all who have come to him in faith. Hope in what we were created to be and to become is held in this verse. It is believing in the redemptive work of Christ in the present, as well as the redemption of our bodies that is yet to come. It is at this place the full and glorious extent of God’s grace and transformation is fully experienced. We, as

believers, wait patiently for what is to be at the God-appointed time.

The patient waiting happens in the “now,” each moment and each day. As we wait, we have many promises of the God who cares for us, and Romans 8:26 gives us a glimpse into the desire God has for us, the compassion that is demonstrated in knowing that the Spirit helps us in our weakness. The Spirit intercedes for us according to God’s will. Is it God’s will for us to suffer? To be persecuted? Or abandoned? I don’t believe those questions are the right questions. I think the better question is *why does God remain present and the Spirit intercede for us?* Romans 8:27 affirms the ever-present and fully-engaged Spirit. The Spirit’s interceding for us is fully known by God because God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are fully one God. In verse 27 there is a deeply relational aspect to the Spirit praying because it is a profoundly personal act. The Spirit’s intercession breathes for us, it labors on our behalf, and I personally believe it is constant just like the love of God.

The previous verse prepares us for Romans 8:28-30—God’s divine purpose will not be thwarted. We have been called and justified for God’s divine purpose. Sometimes people confuse their own will for the divine purpose of God. For example, working very hard to attain a promotion at work or working to become a missionary in Africa, neither of which are wrong or ungodly. But what must happen with this verse is to focus on God’s divine purpose for us as believers. God’s providence and sovereignty are over all things created and in the process of being formed. God is working his purpose out for his kingdom and it is each believer’s choice to live in the purposes of God. What is that purpose? God’s purpose is to conform those who believe to the image of Christ. The destiny of all believers is to become fully Christ-like. This is Paul’s clear focus. We are not exempt from suffering and hardship, but we can take comfort in knowing God’s divine commitment to us now and into eternity is an active commitment of transforming us and conforming us to become fully Christ-like.

We are predestined to become conformed to the image of Jesus. Verse 30 declares that those who believe have been called by God; and those God called, God justified; and those God justifies, God will glorify. This is our hope in the midst of “life.” Whether it be suffering pain, persecution, oppression, isolation, and death, God is intimately active in our life to conform us into the image of God the Son. God’s purpose for each of us is a process of being shaped and formed in this present age, in order to be glorified with God for eternity.

As we move through Romans 8:24-39 we enter into a section of the chapter where Paul writes rhetorical questions where the answers are clearly known. Verses 31-36 set forth Paul’s big message: “God is for us.” This portion of the text clearly points the believer in the direction of recognizing that the Creator of the universe stands with believers. Why? Because the Almighty God is for us.

In verse 32 there is another rhetorical question. It starts with the declaration that God didn’t withhold anything from Christ including pain, suffering, trials, and hardships. Jesus experienced life; God also gave him, Christ, up for all of us. Jesus experienced life like the Roman Christians did. He experienced tremendous suffering at the hands of those who crucified him. Then Paul adds that God will give us everything else. What does that mean? What does this “all” encompass? Does it mean God will give us grace and love to live each day amid hardships and suffering? Or does he mean that, at death, God will give us the fullness of his glory as his children? Both.

To underscore what Paul is communicating in verses 31-36, he sets out on a succession of questions that seem to be somewhat tongue-in-cheek. *Who has more power and authority than God? If God justifies believers, who has the capability to “unjustify” God’s work?* For believers, these are powerful questions because the verses declare that it is truly God who is on their side and is “always present with them” in both the good and the hard times. Another question follows: *Who can condemn us?* Paul knows the

answer to this because of his own lived experiences of being condemned and facing hardships in places where he traveled. The reality of Christ's cross and resurrection stands as our assurance of both the present and the future. Paul begins to bring these series of questions to a close by stating that Christ intercedes on our behalf. Once again, we are looking at God's intense love and affection for us—we are never forgotten.

The crescendo of Romans 8:24-39 begins to pick up volume in verses 35-36 and it is a declaration of God's love for us in any state or situation we are in and will be in. Paul asks, *Can hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, or the sword separate us from love of Christ?* No, nothing; and this begins the final measure of Romans 8:24-39.

We are more than conquerors through Christ Jesus who loves us—in all things, we are *more* than conquerors. This statement relates to the earlier question: *If God the Creator of the universe is for us, who is against us?* Because of God's love and grace, nothing can challenge God. Because of Christ's life, death, and resurrection, believers can live in a reality today unlike the reality of unbelievers. This reality is the victory of God. He has conquered evil and death through Jesus's obedience on the cross.

Nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Paul seems to repeat himself when he testifies that neither death, life, angels, rulers, present circumstances or things in the future, or any powers can separate us from the love of God. These verses at the close of 9:24-39 proclaim and affirm God's power and dominion over everything in life and in death with a unique aspect to this power and dominion: love. It is because of God's overwhelming, never-ending love that believers will never be separated from God; and God demonstrated his deep abiding love *in Jesus Christ*.

## REFLECTION

Romans 8:24-39 is a much-loved part of Scripture, but it can also be a passage that creates discontent, perhaps even dislike, within

an individual. There are certain verses that have been used to gloss over the significance of suffering in a person's life. Verse 28 states, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." This text has been used as a simplistic platitude of comfort. It has often been used without considering the intent of the text itself, or without considering the current state of pain a person has. During a very difficult and life-altering time in my life, people often quoted this verse to me. In the midst of darkness and chaos, I was unable to study this text, let alone take comfort in it. Why? Because I could not even fathom how God could make it work together for the good of anything. I think this text can be overused and repeated without any consideration of the circumstance and intense pain, hurt, or separation someone is going through. So how can this passage bring hope and healing to those in distress? What makes it relevant and not cliché?

The most prominent themes in this are the intimate work of the Holy Spirit within and on behalf of the believer, the relationship between hardship and suffering in light of eternity (the "not yet"), and the believer being conformed to the image of Christ (the "now"). This text provides us with perspective on the present we live in, and Paul gives us his vision of the glory awaiting all of us in death. Paul was a man who knew heartbreak, physical suffering, oppression, public ridicule, and incarceration; he faced criticism daily and desertion by many whom he held dear. Paul didn't write Romans as an intellectual exercise. He wrote Romans knowing the hardships people were facing in Rome, knowing that their personal convictions were being challenged and their faith was being tested. He also wrote Romans and his other epistles knowing that this life is one we are passing through, and the life lived in Christ in glory is our destination. Though Paul lived his life robustly and "out-loud" (as his letters confirm), he also lived with an ever-present awareness of the eternal resurrected life that will reveal our transformation in the likeness of Christ. In other words, Paul was physically present

in this world, but he was already living into the life of the resurrected body. He believed that the story of salvation isn't over until the redemption of the body. It is only then that the full extent of God's grace and transformation are experienced.

Paul holds out to us the hope we have in our salvation. Though we, as believers, have experienced the saving grace of Jesus Christ, we are holding this hope for the eternal resurrection that God promised us. Paul says, "We wait patiently." Could he mean that we wait patiently in a world where pain, suffering, hardship, and oppression are an ever-present constant, in a world where evil lives and so does love, grace, compassion, and hope?

We must pay close attention to the work of the Spirit. Paul sets this forth in verses 26-27: "Likewise the Spirit knows our weaknesses; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for saints according to the will of God."

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, great strides have been made in caring for people who have experienced trauma and one of the greatest, yet most simplistic insights emerged—people in crisis and distress cannot process advice that aims to change their thinking *while* they are experiencing crisis. It is almost impossible because the circuits within the brain are firing on multiple levels. We just can't process information in a normal fashion. But the Spirit *knows* this and makes intercession that is too deep for words. The Spirit's advocacy is so deep there are no words to speak. That is truly deep, relational intimacy. It is also deeply affirming for each person to know God's abiding love and understanding of our humanity, our brokenness, our need for him, as well as our inability to cope on our own. In this, Paul doesn't grant exemption from suffering and pain. He pushes forward in the text alluding to the purposes of God. Even the worst persecutions and hardships don't hold a candle to what is to come and what the believer has in their midst—the Spirit in them who intercedes.

Paul also intentionally focuses on the believers' resurrected life and conformity to the image of God in Christ Jesus. I don't believe this theme takes away from the here-and-now that Paul addresses in Romans 8:24-39; it really is more of a reminder that the present hardships, pain and suffering, must be viewed through the lens of our coming glory with Christ. It is really living in the now, as well as the not-yet. This theme is a driving force in the last eight verses of this text.

Lingering in the back of our minds are the questions: *Why would God allow pain and suffering? Has God changed his mind about us?* Paul answers with another rhetorical question: "If God is for us, who is against us?" And for Paul, the answer is clear. God, who did not spare his son—the son that became incarnate God, fully human and fully God—has demonstrated that he is for us. This fact doesn't end the pain and suffering in this present world, but it does say that no matter the circumstances, God remains faithful to us and wants us to live and trust in this truth.

The "who" questions in verses 33 through 35 seem to be the yellow highlighter he uses to emphasize the permanent and steadfast presence of God and the unbreakable, impermeable, overwhelming love of God in Christ Jesus. Paul isn't denying the difficulties in life. The good news is that we are more than conquerors in this life and the next because of the love of God in Christ Jesus. God's love is the place in which we can live in our present circumstances and look toward our resurrection.

## CONCLUSION

Tonight, I had the honor of listening to a live lecture by Richard Foster, author of *Celebration of Discipline*. He shared that learning to grow in the grace and love of God was to live knowing it is about progress—it is coming to value the slow work of God, because it is God who is working to bring us into Christ-likeness. Life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, just as in Paul's day, isn't always easy or free of hardship, but we are growing in grace and understand-

ing of the power of God's love. Richard Foster closed the evening with these words: "Fun ahead, saith the Lord."

## CHAPTER 4.

### SUFFERING WITHOUT SHAME

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#### 2 CORINTHIANS 1:1-11

#### MARTHA BYRNE VAN HOUTEN

*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,*

*To the church of God that is in Corinth, including all the saints throughout Achaia:*

*<sup>2</sup> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>3</sup> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, <sup>4</sup> who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. <sup>5</sup> For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ. <sup>6</sup> If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation; if we are being consoled, it is for your consolation, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we are also suffering. <sup>7</sup> Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our consolation. <sup>8</sup> We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. <sup>9</sup> Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death so that we would rely*

*not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.* <sup>10</sup> *He who rescued us from so deadly a peril will continue to rescue us; on him we have set our hope that he will rescue us again,* <sup>11</sup> *as you also join in helping us by your prayers, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.* ~ 2 Corinthians 1:1-11 (NRSV)

## INTRODUCTION

When my mom was 36, she lost her 32-year-old sister to an aggressive form of breast cancer. My five-year-old memory of the time only carries small frames of the memorial service, the meals with family, the pictures. I remember sitting dry-eyed in a room of crying cousins, feeling confused that I couldn't muster the right emotion. And I'm told I let it all out a couple days later, sitting on my mom's lap at the graveside service.

I don't remember my mom crying a single time—at least I never saw it. In her family you moved quickly past the sadness and only entertained the joyful end. Suffering was shameful; finding the good in every situation was something to be proud of. *She's in heaven! God has a purpose for this! We have a lot to be thankful for!* Christians are a blessed people, so let's not admit to suffering and instead call it by a different name.

Only months after my aunt's memorial service, my family moved across the country to the Midwest for my dad to attend seminary. We moved into graduate student housing. We didn't know a single person. We weren't prepared for the snow-packed winters. And a few months in, my mom got really sick. Not cancer, nothing terminal. But a persistent, winter-long influenza that left her too weak to leave the house (or bed) more often than not. She says it was grief. The suffering she stuffed months earlier found its own way out.

## SCRIPTURE

### The Comfort of God for a Suffering Apostle

The apostle Paul was no stranger to suffering. Throughout his missionary journeys he endured imprisonment, beatings, betrayal, shipwreck. But 2 Corinthians specifically—with multiple references to suffering, consolation, rescue, and affliction—reveals the inner turmoil of an apostle suffering anxiety over his church.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul faces so-called apostles who are provoking mistrust in his credentials and vying for the loyalty of the Corinthians. These rival teachers boast of their own superior speaking skills and charisma, and discredit Paul on the basis of the suffering he has experienced.<sup>1</sup> In their estimation, a “spiritual high” and signs of accomplishment make a true apostle. If Paul’s gospel is really good news, why is he suffering? Because for Paul, the gospel requires that disciples follow Christ Jesus’ pattern of suffering on the way to resurrection. Therefore, Paul writes 2 Corinthians to discredit the shiny façade of his rivals and provide a real theology of suffering for the church.

To start his argument in 2 Corinthians 1:1-11, Paul addresses his letter to the “church of God,” of which Paul is a servant, from “an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God” (2 Cor. 1:1). His apostleship has been established *by God*; he is not self-appointed, as are many of his rivals. So, after establishing his credentials, Paul begins with a blessing that focuses on God’s activity in Paul’s life:<sup>2</sup> “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort” (2 Cor 1:3). Paul is familiar with God as comforter because he studied Old Testament poetry (like Isaiah 40:1 and Psalm 119:50).<sup>3</sup> But he has also personally experienced, as Linda Belleville writes, “a Father who is moved to compassion and a God who responds with the provision of comfort.”<sup>4</sup> Paul does not expect that his present circumstance of suffering will end, but he celebrates the assurance of God’s help and encouragement in the midst of trial.

Paul does not celebrate the comfort of God for his own ease, but for the longer-standing and farther-reaching purpose of equipping him to serve others: "...who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God" (2 Cor. 2:14). Paul receives comfort in knowing his suffering is not meaningless because it benefits his ministry of the gospel of Christ.

Paul is also not ashamed of admitting that as believers "...we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ" (2 Cor 1:5), because he recognizes that authentic discipleship doesn't only share in glory and blessings, but also shares in Christ's sufferings. Victory is only possible through the cross.<sup>5</sup> Paul's suffering necessarily mirrors and continues the suffering of Christ on the path to glory.

Paul also desires to reveal the close connection between his life and the life of the church—what impacts one will ultimately impact the other. When Paul experiences hardship, the church may fear the worst, but Paul reminds them: "Our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort" (2 Cor 1:7). The apostle and the church are bound together, friends for the journey and companions of consolation.

Paul doesn't merely wax eloquent about suffering; it's grounded in personal experience, which he shares in 1:8: "We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia" (2 Cor. 1:8). He doesn't give them details, but it must have been pretty bad.

Paul "despaired of life itself" and felt he and his travel companions had faced "the sentence of death." In an ancient context, the admission of such a perilous circumstance would be met with consequences. Socially and economically, a serious hardship could have left Paul unable to work for a period of time, in a society that didn't offer support for those without financial independence. Religiously, Judaism equated health with religious

standing. Stoics and cynics believed in training the mind to be powerful, overcoming the weakness of the flesh.<sup>6</sup>

Despite putting his reputation at risk, Paul references the event unashamedly because he believes there is purpose in his suffering. Not only will his suffering produce comfort that he can share with others, but God also purposes that Paul be stripped of self-confidence in order to submit trust for his life and death to God. Paul writes, “But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again” (2 Cor 1:9b-10a). Paul places no hope for overcoming obstacles in his own abilities. He believes that only God—in his resurrection power—can sustain him through whatever trial he faces.<sup>7</sup> And he offers this as a fair warning to the Corinthians to not become confident in their own spirituality apart from the saving work of Christ.<sup>8</sup>

But Paul also includes additional means by which deliverance comes: “...as you help us by your prayers” (2 Cor 1:11a). Again Paul intertwines his life with the church—his deliverance is a result of their prayers. God will continue to deliver if the church continues to pray. The story of suffering and comfort is mutual for Paul and the church. While the church may be eager for independence, Paul shows the need the body of believers has for each other.<sup>9</sup> It is Paul’s desire for the church to accept his own story of suffering, because if they reject him, it will be one and the same as rejecting the story of Jesus’s suffering and redemptive work.<sup>10</sup>

## REFLECTION

### **Suffering without Shame**

How many pastors or Christian leaders today would share their personal suffering so publicly and unashamedly as Paul? Would they stand up on a Sunday morning and tell a story about their struggles with mental or physical health? How many of them might blog about their daily battle with pride or the temptation of personal glory? Or solicit prayers for strength when others

attack and criticize them? Similar to what Paul faced, admitting weakness may seem too great a risk for those with an audience.

The parishioners certainly don't make it easier either. We expect to see the fruit of blessing in the lives of our leaders. It's like the Dayquil commercial that claims moms and dads don't take sick days. We see ministers and leaders as far too crucial to our health and well-being to allow for their weakness or vulnerability. We need them to be strong so they can carry us to the feet of Jesus. If they become ill, who will visit them in the hospital? If they are betrayed, who will sit by their side and pray?

Charles Spurgeon was a mid-19<sup>th</sup> century English Baptist minister, known as the "Prince of Preachers." He is credited with numerous volumes of texts and sermons. Yet his private and public life was dotted with physical health issues like gout, rheumatism, and Bright's disease; a sickly wife; and shame over his persistent struggle with depression. An untrained preacher who skyrocketed to success and spoke unashamedly about the gospel, he also faced frequent ridicule and slander. Yet he persisted with his preaching career and remains well-known and read today.

Here is an excerpt from a letter he wrote to his father, responding to the slander he faced:

Do not be grieved at the slanderous libel in this week's Express. Of course, it is all a lie, without an atom of foundation; and while the whole of London is talking of me, and thousands are unable to get near the door, the opinion of a penny-a-liner is of little consequence...

I only fear for you; I do not like you to be grieved. *For myself I will rejoice; the devil is roused, the Church is awakening, and I am now counted worthy to suffer for Christ's sake...*

Last night, I could not sleep till morning light, but now *my Master has cheered me; and I "hail reproach, and welcome shame."*<sup>11</sup>

*Counted worthy to suffer for Christ's sake.* Like Paul, Spurgeon must have been convinced that suffering would come to all disciples of Christ, even ministers. But imagine how life may have been

different for Spurgeon had he felt the support of a church in the midst of his health struggles, rather than the added stress of slander? Did he have a community that prayed for him fervently as he no doubt prayed for them? Paul shows us that the body of Christ belongs to each other, in grief and joy. What affects one will affect the other. This is the beauty of a community that shares the suffering of Christ—no one is alone.

Spurgeon's life also shows us that the ways we suffer (physical health, mental illness, betrayal, financial stress, familial tension, etc.) do not discredit our witness as disciples. As we find strength and comfort in the God who raises the dead, we are able to share this comfort with others. The experiences of our suffering actually make us credible in our ministry to others. Spurgeon frequently experienced shame over his own depression, calling it the worst part about him. Yet he was also able to say, "I would go into the deeps a hundred times to cheer a downcast spirit. It is good for me to have been afflicted, that I might know how to speak a word in season to one that is weary."<sup>12</sup>

When we have received comfort from God, we are equipped to offer consolation to others. In the 3-season British crime drama, *Broadchurch*, two detectives investigate the murder of a young boy, Danny, in a small coastal English town. Throughout the whole series, the murderer is found, tried, and acquitted. The parents, Beth and Mark, respond to the tragic loss of their son, and the bitter injustice of the aftermath, with all the natural flows of grief: anger, denial, blame, depression. Yet as the series progresses, they take distinct turns—Mark toward rage and despair, and Beth toward a sense of purpose and health. By the third season we find out that Beth has been trained as an advocate on behalf of women who experience abuse and trauma. No doubt she still experiences pain at such a great loss. But she has taken the resources she learned through her own suffering and grief, and channeled them into providing empathy and comfort for others in need of similar resources. The media may be full of stories of people reaching out in empathy. Now think how much

deeper the well of compassion could be if its source is the God of all comfort?

I recently stumbled upon a story about one of my favorite New Testament scholars, Craig Keener, and his wife, Medine. Medine was a war refugee for 18 months in the Congo. During that time she experienced physical and mental suffering—starvation, danger, illness, loss. All the while, her American friend, Craig, prayed for her well-being and safety on a daily basis. Craig had recently suffered through a broken relationship. He found a sense of hope and consolation in an African American church where he eventually became ordained. Craig says, “I found that the black church knew how to deal with pain because they had been dealing with it for many years.”<sup>13</sup> Only those who have known pain and experienced the hope of Christ can truly provide a bridge to hope for another who suffers.

And the comfort reached further still. Now married, Craig and Medine work together for racial reconciliation. They have taken the pain in both of their stories and understood that God strengthened and sustained them through their own trials. They have hope to offer others. They are not weaker because of their suffering, but stronger for the sake of their ministry. Their words and their lives sing of God’s comfort and sustenance in suffering. Craig says, “The message of our faith is that we can trust God...even when we go through the hardships, because the cross is the prerequisite for the resurrection.”<sup>14</sup>

Stories like this remind disciples of Christ that we follow the path of Christ, from the suffering of Calvary, to the glory of resurrection. And according to Paul, there is no other way. The gospel we believe must be lived out, and this includes opening our arms to even the suffering, knowing full well that God, who raises the dead, offers us a future hope as well.

## CONCLUSION

### Sharing our Suffering with Others

When my aunt died, I wish my mom had known that suffering was not a mark of shame in the life of a believer. I wish she hadn't felt like she had to hide her suffering from her family, from church people, from complete strangers. And yet even that journey through suffering enabled a new level of comfort from God, a deeper understanding of consolation that she can offer to others. Knowing the power of the resurrection, she is more comfortable to sit in the moment, rather than avoid or dismiss suffering, because she knows God's love is wrapped around her still. Who else has gone through death and has the power to spread balm over the sting of suffering? With this consolation in mind, she is slower to offer a solution to those in the trenches of suffering and quicker to listen. After all, as disciples of Jesus, we cannot expect our lives to look different than the one we follow—the one who embodied suffering and stretches out his arms to comfort the sufferer. The journey is marked with suffering, but the hope of new life awaits us. And the one who raised the dead has all the power to walk us through whatever we face.

Are there places in your life where you've dismissed suffering because you worried it would count you as "less than" a disciple? What does your suffering show you about your self-reliance or your trust in God's power? Have you been quick to judge the suffering of another? Who may need your comfort through prayer today? How could the suffering you've experienced aid you in offering to others the comfort of the God who raised the dead?

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort.*

### Notes

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## CHAPTER 5.

### GOD'S STRENGTH IN OUR WEAKNESS

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#### 2 CORINTHIANS 4:7

ANNA S. CARLSON

*But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. ~ 2 Corinthians 4:7 (NRSV)*

#### INTRODUCTION

When my husband and I traveled to Japan a few years ago, I learned about an art form that takes a broken piece of ceramic and rejoins the pieces together with a golden powdered infused lacquer. The ceramic experiences a renewed life that highlights its cracks, flaws, and weaknesses with beautiful golden lines joining the pieces together. Kintsugi, meaning “golden joinery,” is this method that mends the flaws of ceramics exposing and accentuating the ceramic’s weakness, while also revealing that it has a story to tell.<sup>1</sup> In this essence, a piece of pottery continues its use in spite of its obvious flaws.

One of the apostle Paul’s many metaphors for life in Christ is his reference to clay jars in 2 Corinthians 4:7. Paul uses this imagery to underscore the disparity between God and humanity; the difference between the Creator and the created. Like the

Japanese Kintsugi ceramics, fragile and flawed vessels have a distinct purpose according to Paul. Though Paul emphasizes these clay, earthen jars as ordinary, they carry a “treasure” that is extraordinary. In this one verse, Paul reveals a paradox and a promise for the faithful followers of Christ: the weak and ordinary demonstrate the surpassing power of God through hope in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ the Lord. In the context of 2 Corinthians 4:1-12, Paul teaches his readers that the resurrection power of God is sustenance and life through suffering.

## SCRIPTURE

The location of Corinth lent itself to become a commercial and military center set on an isthmus situated between the Gulf of Corinth and the Saronic Gulf, making it one of the more important cities in the first century Roman Empire.<sup>2</sup> Because of its advantageous location, Corinth developed an “international reputation” for its diversity and plurality of religions and philosophies.<sup>3</sup> This background would have made Corinth a daunting task for presenting the gospel. Corinth’s slogan during Paul’s time illustrates the challenge of this city: “Not for everyone is the journey to Corinth.”<sup>4</sup> What a tough place to work and minister!

In spite of this, Paul pastored the church for approximately eighteen months prior to the letters written to the church (Acts 18:11); writing 2 Corinthians in the midst of conflict and criticism between himself and the church of Corinth. In Acts 18 we see the number of believers grew while Paul encountered challenges in Corinth, including a group of Jews bringing charges against him in the court of the proconsul (Acts 18:12). Given these circumstances and the diverse setting of Corinth, it is likely that the majority of the church of Corinth consisted of Gentile Christians with whom Paul was working.<sup>5</sup>

In 2 Corinthians 4:1-12, Paul addresses the accusations brought against him from a small group of Jewish Christian apostles that had visited the Corinthian church. These opponents of Paul’s, to whom he refers with a hint of sarcasm as “super

apostles” (2 Cor 11:5, 12:11), criticize him harshly to the Corinthians saying he is “timid when face to face,” “bold when away,” “unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing” (2 Cor 10:1 and 10), and they imply Paul’s work is not Spirit-led because it lacks signs and wonders (2 Cor 13:3-4). This passage conveys Paul’s defense against the opponent’s accusations of his seemingly weak presence and skills as an apostle while he also diminishes the authority of these teachers. He found himself in a position of needing to legitimize the authenticity of his apostleship and regain their loyalty, because the church of Corinth was blinded by these outside apostles. As a result, the intent of 2 Corinthians is to re-establish the legitimacy of his apostolic ministry, while affirming their faithful service and reconciling with the church in Corinth.

It is in the midst of this shaky relationship that Paul writes 2 Corinthians 4:7 in order to put a positive spin on his apostleship and to remind the Corinthians that suffering is consistent in life with Christ. Paul encourages the church to “not lose heart” because “God’s mercy” has given them the gospel of Christ (2 Cor 4:1). This is the new covenant that the Corinthians are living out, but he realizes they have been confused by the new teachers. Knowing his audience well and the Jewish heritage which these opponents glorified, Paul refers to Moses, who received the law from God, in order to contrast the old Mosaic covenant with the new covenant with Christ. Just prior to this passage, Paul boldly asserts that the ministry of “the Spirit of the Lord” unveils and transforms believers “into the same image” of the Lord (2 Cor 3:7-18). In contrast, Moses veiled his face because the Israelites were “gazing” at his “radiance” (2 Cor 3:13).

With this foundation set, Paul uses eloquent imagery to express the power of God that will be glorified. Paul’s ministry is unveiled and reflects the Lord’s glory in contrast to Moses who wore a veil. In the new covenant, being veiled is how Satan, “the god of this world,” blinds unbelievers from knowing God (2 Cor 4:4). Specifically, Paul says Satan blinds unbelievers “from see-

ing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ” (2 Cor 4:4). It is the Holy Spirit who unveils believers’ eyes so that they can see the Lord’s goodness and be transformed into the “likeness” of Christ, “who is the image of God” (2 Cor 3:18 and 4:4). Satan blinds people to the Lord, but the Creator enlightens believers. Paul reminds his readers that the same Creator who spoke light in the darkness gives “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 4:6). Opposite to Satan’s darkness is God’s enlightenment. Through the Holy Spirit, God’s power is illuminated and brings light into the darkness.

Directly responding to this enlightenment, Paul calls believers “clay jars” that carry “this treasure,” which is the gospel of Christ (2 Cor 4:7). Paul makes the distinction that within an ordinary, daily-used vessel – like a jar – is an extraordinary treasure. This distinction strongly demonstrates that the gospel is revealed only through the power and mercy of God. Paul refuses to glorify himself because all glory goes to God. Paul reminds the Corinthians that he is a servant for the sake of Jesus (2 Cor 4:5). He is an ordinary vessel sharing extraordinary news.

Paul gives evidence to this amazing power of God through his personal examples of suffering in verses 8-9. Paul masterfully uses another literary device to underscore the power of God within his weakness and pain by opposing four examples of suffering with living. “Afflicted,” “but not crushed;” “perplexed,” but not in “despair;” “persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed” (4:8-9). The way Paul writes these verses reveals an ongoing process. Affliction does not happen only once; it can continue. Yet, believers are not crushed by affliction. Persecution happens, but the believer is not forsaken by God. Rather, God carries the believer, preventing her from being destroyed, forsaken, or crushed. Each of these examples reveals a process of dying to suffering and a living in Christ.

Notice that Paul uses “we” rather than “I” in this passage. Paul is not alone in suffering for the gospel. He has co-workers in ministry. He also implies a greater life with Christ for believers.

Paul indicates that inherent with ministering the gospel is suffering and pain, but that Christ is with the suffering.

The crux of the treasure in the clay jar for Paul is that there is dying before there is rising. Paul states in verse 10 that the clay jar, which contains the treasure of the gospel, experiences suffering because part of the vessel's message is "always carrying in the body the death of Jesus." Jesus lived and suffered a torturous death in order for there to be a resurrection. While the Corinthians may have believed that the power of God is made visible through signs and miracles, Paul strongly emphasizes that the dynamic power of God is most made visible through affliction and suffering.<sup>6</sup> The progression of Paul's writing here conveys that God enlightens believers, ordinary and unimpressive creatures, to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and this gospel carries with it affliction. The believer carries within them Jesus' crucifixion which then makes Jesus' life visible through believers. The Corinthians may have thought dying with Christ was a one-time experience with transformation, but Paul demolishes that thinking by stating that "while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh" (2 Cor 4:11). Being transformed by Jesus Christ means that life in Christ is a continuous process of sharing in the death of Jesus.<sup>7</sup>

## REFLECTION

In this passage, Paul expresses to the Corinthians a cruciform hope and faithfulness amidst suffering. Paul uses paradox to contrast light and dark, ordinary and extraordinary, death and life – to emphasize the power of God made evident through clay jars. As a result, three exhortations from Paul are found within this passage.

First, Paul believes that his flawed and unimpressive clay jar is a conduit for God's extraordinary work. Paul repeatedly points the reader to the glory of God and for the sake of Christ, rather than his personal glory (2 Cor 4:1, 5, 7, and 11). Paul is a mes-

senger, a clay jar, for the Lord because of the mercy of God. The glory is not the clay jar, but the treasure of light revealed inside the ordinary, unimpressive jar. God, who created light to shine through darkness, reveals the extraordinary, saving life of Jesus through an ordinary vessel. When cooking, a pot roast needs a baking dish to contain the juices that give it flavor. There is nothing impressive about the baking dish, but it provides the platform for a delicious entrée. Paul suggests believers are unimpressive conduits that serve a great role for the Lord.

Second, Paul makes it clear that life with Christ comes by sharing in the death of Jesus (2 Cor 4:10-11). In this paradox of life and death, Paul teaches that the power of God is visible in human frailty. Jesus died so that there would be a new creation through his resurrection. Paul states that living in Jesus transforms the believer into Christ's likeness (2 Cor 3:18). Living a Christ-like model, which Paul certainly emulated, involves being obedient in faith and ultimately dependent on God.<sup>8</sup> The evidence of living with Jesus is "always carrying in the body the death of Jesus" (2 Cor 4:10). This is what makes life with Jesus visible. In the words of N.T. Wright, "if you want to see resurrection at work here and now, in your own life, you have to be prepared to see crucifixion at work as well."<sup>9</sup> There will likely be situations in life that a believer will need to die to or lay at the cross of Jesus – chronic pain from a physical disability, mental illness like depression and anxiety, or experiencing significant loss. These do not have simple and quick fixes, and they require long-term care. Such conditions in Paul's perspective need to be acknowledged and carried to the cross. Paul emphasizes that new life comes with dying to certain expectations and standards of the world.

Third, there is hope amidst suffering. For Paul, hope came with the death of Jesus because Jesus' death became a resurrection. Paul ministers in a pattern after Jesus going to the cross, and this gave him confidence to proclaim the gospel and "not lose heart" (2 Cor 4:1). Suffering in Paul's perspective demonstrates God's resurrection power. He juxtaposes suffering with an aspect of

living in 2 Corinthians 4:8-9. We may suffer affliction, but we will not be crushed because dying with Christ—that is suffering with Christ—has the future hope of the day we will be raised with the Lord.<sup>10</sup> Paul reveals an understanding of suffering in the context of hope in the cross, a future hope with the risen Christ. This hope sustains Paul through the difficulty of pain and adversity where he is empowered and strengthened by God to endure suffering.<sup>11</sup>

The longer one lives, the greater the chances are to experience more pain and suffering. I see this in the life of my grandmother who has lived one hundred years. She has witnessed and endured the difficulties and blessings that life can bring in a century of living. In her life, she experienced emigration from Norway to America, being a foreigner and a western pioneer, assimilation, death of loved ones at a young age, working her way through school, marriage, motherhood, anxiety, and depression. When we are together, she exudes the wisdom of her life experiences. She recalls the mixed emotions of her nine-year-old self who left the family farm and her two oldest sisters in Norway. I see how the Great Depression imprinted on her the value of minimalism and fighting through scarcity. She shares about her devastating grief when her father died too young, shortly after starting their homestead in Montana. Her widowed mother had to send all but the youngest two children to different locations for work and school. By her young teen years, my grandmother was managing herself in a city separate from her mother so that she could finish high school and then later go to teacher's college. As she reflects on her youth, she recalls for me her sense of the power of God protecting her and keeping her from despair as a young woman forging her way. Immigration, learning a new language and culture, the death of a parent, economic depression, independence as a teen: these did not crush her. She represents a clay vessel that reveals the power of God through the work of the Holy Spirit over her life.

Second Corinthians reveals that life with Christ will include

hardship. Paul is not expressing that there HAS to be hardship. Rather, he witnesses to remaining faithful to God and being sustained by God through hardship and distress. Paul does not believe life with Jesus will be problem-free, easy, and prosperous just for having faith in Christ. Instead, living a resurrected life with Christ involves crucifixion before there is resurrection. This was a value reversal for the Corinthians, and it remains that way today.<sup>12</sup> Suffering, according to Paul, is a part of the gospel.

## CONCLUSION

Through 2 Corinthians 4, we see Paul conveying that the issue surrounding suffering is not *why* it happens, but rather *how to be faithful to the Lord while in suffering*. Paul believes God shines through weakness to make Christ visible. This passage is an encouragement when experiencing adversity; a pep talk from Paul about enduring any sort of pain, challenge, or suffering. God's power will both carry and work through Jesus' followers to make the glory of Christ known in the world like an ordinary clay jar whose cracks have been infused with shiny, golden lacquer strengthening its life.

Paul reminds us that life with Christ comes with Jesus' death. What is something you need to die to or give up in order to resurrect your life? Where do you need to practice humility in order to make Christ visible? How do you see the cracks in your clay structure being renewed by Christ? "For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you" (2 Cor 4:11-12).

## Notes

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6. Linda L. Belleville, *2 Corinthians*, IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1996), 123.
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11. Raymond Pickett, *The Cross in Corinth: The Social Significance of the Death of Jesus*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 143 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 133; Belleville, *2 Corinthians*, 122-123; and Douglas A. Campbell, "2 Corinthians 4:13: Evidence in Paul that Christ Believes," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128.2 (2009): 351.
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## CHAPTER 6.

# THE FLESH AND THE THORN: OUR WEAKNESS, CHRIST'S POWER

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## 2 CORINTHIANS 12:1-10

### JARED BUCKO

*It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. <sup>2</sup> I know a person 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. <sup>3</sup> And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows— <sup>4</sup> was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. <sup>5</sup> On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. <sup>6</sup> But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, <sup>7</sup> even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. <sup>8</sup> Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, <sup>9</sup> but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. <sup>10</sup> Therefore I am content with weak-*

*nesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.* ~ 2 Corinthians 12:1-10 (NRSV)

## INTRODUCTION

It was a normal Thursday morning in September, except that when I came to, I realized there were three EMTs standing in my bedroom. Disoriented and more than a little confused, I soon learned that I had had a seizure in my sleep. My wife had called 911. After being taken to the emergency room, completing a CT scan, and following up later with an MRI, the doctors were unable to determine the cause. “It’s okay,” they said, “a high percentage of individuals who have one seizure never have another one again.” “Phew,” I thought, “I’m sure that will be the case for me.” Nearly three months later, on December 25<sup>th</sup>, I had another seizure. Just like that day in September, my wife called 911, and I awoke to EMTs in my bedroom. Merry Christmas to me. “Two strikes and you’re out,” the emergency room doctor told me later that morning, “we need to put you on medication for epilepsy.” Clearly, she wasn’t a baseball player.

Nearly a year and a half has passed since I had my second seizure, but in that time, I have struggled with depression, anxiety, and mood swings, as well as back problems caused by the first seizure. Through the help of counseling, continued care from my doctors, and the unfailing support of my wife, family, and friends, I am grateful to now be much healthier physically and mentally than I was for many months following my seizures. Still, the effects linger, and after a period of denial, I have had to come to terms with the fact that I do, in fact, have epilepsy. This has left me with a lot of unanswered questions, the most basic simply being—why? What caused these seizures? Why did it have to happen? Will I be on medication for the rest of my life? Is God trying to teach me something through this experience? I don’t know the answers to these questions, at least not yet, but I am

grateful to be learning to find contentment even in the midst of hardship and uncertainty.

## SCRIPTURE

At some point in our lives, we all experience some form of suffering. For some, it might come suddenly and unexpectedly, as it did for me with the onset of my seizures. Others may know suffering and hardship as a daily reality. For the apostle Paul, persecution, hardship, and suffering were an ongoing reality of his ministry. In 2 Corinthians 11, he famously outlines a number of calamities that had befallen him:

*Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches. (2 Corinthians 11:25-28, NRSV)*

That is quite a list! Notice that no matter where Paul went—the city or the country—and no matter whom he encountered—whether Jew or Gentile—he faced intense adversity.

To make matters worse, in 2 Corinthians 12:7, Paul tells the Corinthians, “I was given a thorn in my body because of the outstanding revelations I’ve received so that I wouldn’t be conceited. It’s a messenger from Satan sent to torment me so that I wouldn’t be conceited” (CEB). You see, in 12:1-4 Paul had just told the story of “a man” who “was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told.” Biblical scholars tend to agree that the “man” to whom Paul refers is in fact himself. Most likely, Paul refers to himself in the third person as a way of distancing himself from the revelation, because he did not want the Corinthians to focus on that aspect of his story. Many in the Corinthian church had been turned against Paul by the “super apostles” who

questioned Paul's authority due to the amount of hardship he had experienced. Surely, they claimed, one who has authority in the Lord would be protected from such adversity. One of the ways these super apostles supported their own claim to authority was by citing personal visions and revelations and boasting of their superiority to Paul. In 2 Corinthians chapters 10-13, Paul is addressing these divisions within the Corinthian church, and the attack on his authority.

Commentator David Garland has the following to say about why Paul related the story of his revelation in such an odd manner:

[Paul's vision] indicates that he could compete with anything his rivals might boast about.

But, by reporting this vision so vaguely and in the third person, Paul would seem to depreciate its significance. He does not seem to care, as some might in Corinth, if it was an out of the body experience or not. He leaves it with God because to him it is unimportant. He does not, as some did, make much ado about his private religious experiences.<sup>1</sup>

Paul's desire is for the Corinthians to judge his authority and worthiness as an apostle based on his observable actions and preaching of the gospel, not unverifiable claims to personal experiences. Also commenting on Paul's approach to revelation in these verses, scholar Ernest Best observes— "unless a spiritual experience would be helpful in building up a church there was no need to talk about it."<sup>2</sup>

Understanding Paul's context and the opposition that he was facing helps clarify the significance of his thorn in the flesh. Twice he tells us that the thorn was sent to keep him from becoming conceited about his visions and revelations. The thorn keeps him humble. It is important to acknowledge that no one knows for sure exactly what Paul meant by the thorn in the flesh, though the general consensus among scholars is that it is a metaphorical reference to some physical ailment. Various theories have been proposed for the specific nature of what this

ailment might have been, including a visual impairment, a significant limp, or even epilepsy. Whatever it was, the thorn plagued Paul and “three times” he prayed that it would leave him. It is probable that Paul actually prayed many times for the affliction to leave him and this is a poetic way of indicating the completeness of his prayer.

Immediately, in 12:9, we discover that Paul’s prayer was answered—just not in the manner which he had hoped for. The response that he receives from the Lord represents the only time in all of Paul’s writing the words of the risen Christ appear.<sup>3</sup> What Jesus tells Paul is brief but carries incredible power. In many ways it encapsulates the salvific essence of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. He says this: “My grace is sufficient for you, for [my] power is made perfect in weakness.” Some translations leave out the “my” before power, but including it makes it clear whose power this verse refers to—it is the power of Jesus, the risen Lord. It is the grace of Jesus that restores and makes Paul whole, even in the midst of anguish and suffering.

Paul’s reply to Jesus is nearly as stunning. He boldly declares the following: “I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” Rather than apologize for his shortcomings or make excuses for his struggles, Paul defies all cultural norms surrounding honor and shame, and embraces the reality of his human frailty. Instead of expressing regret for the things that have happened to him, Paul makes the radical claim that “[h]is weakness is the occasion for God’s sufficient grace and power.”<sup>4</sup> What Paul tells the Corinthians is that in the midst of hardship and failure, the grace and power of Christ reveals itself all the more clearly in his life.

## REFLECTION

### Power in Weakness

2 Corinthians 12:9-10 represents the culmination of an intensely personal experience that Paul relates to the Corinthians over the course of this passage. These two verses contain profound theology that has major implications not just for Paul and the Corinthians, but for all Christians. Commenting on the significance of Paul's affliction, scholar Dustin Ellington observes that by "[g]rounding his thorn in God's activity, a thorn-stricken apostle becomes no longer an oxymoron but a paradigm for believers and their leaders."<sup>5</sup> Essentially, Paul turned the expectations of the Corinthians upside-down. While they were questioning his authority and ministry, he demonstrated why his thorn did not contradict his calling in any way. In fact, it allowed the power of Christ to work in his life all the more clearly. Even though Paul received the thorn in the flesh for a specific purpose—to keep him from becoming conceited—the more that we reflect on this passage, the clearer it becomes that the lesson he learned from his experience is applicable to all believers.

Today, just as in Paul's time, Christian believers may be tempted to view hardship and suffering, particularly persistent physical affliction, as an indication that they have done something wrong. If one prays for healing and remains afflicted, they may think that their prayers have not been fervent enough, or even worse, that they have not been heard in the first place. Our society, just like the Corinthians, places an enormous amount of value on physical health and the ability to demonstrate that one is powerful, capable, and accomplished. Today, we tend to discourage blatant boasting of the kind that the Corinthians used to try and climb the social ladder. Instead, we have replaced rhetoric with our own socially acceptable forms of self-promotion.

A perfect example is leveraging social media for our own benefit and putting out a version of ourselves on the Internet to make ourselves feel good and others jealous. We all know someone

who is constantly curating their online presence, posting amazing photos, talking about how blessed they are, etc. We rarely get to see the hurts, insecurities, and suffering that we all experience as humans. Something remarkable about Paul's vision is that he tells us it happened fourteen years in the past. In all the time that he has known the Corinthians, he has not had a reason to tell them about it until now. Imagine if someone today had a revelation like that—they would most likely be tweeting about it within five minutes! By downplaying the significance of his revelation as he does, Paul completely rejects the values of a society that strives for success and glory. By emphasizing the presence of his thorn, and the word he received from the Lord, he takes all of the attention off of his own efforts, and instead focuses it on the power of Christ that is at work in his life.

In sharing his own experience, Paul also issues a call for believers, then and now, to seek contentment even in the midst of hardship and persecution. This does not mean that we should rejoice in or idealize suffering—after all, Paul initially prayed that the thorn would leave him—but we are called to recognize that the power and glory of Christ is often seen most clearly in the depths of our suffering and weakness. For me, this has meant journeying through some dark times in recent years and coming to realize that it is the power and grace of God in my life that enables me to do the things that I do. Experiencing two seizures, and everything that has come with that, has shown me how much I need others, and especially how much I need God. I cannot do everything on my own. Whether it is participating in physical activities, pursuing an academic degree, or attempting creative endeavors, I have learned that the abilities I have are indeed part of who God has made me, but they are also gifts, and they are not guaranteed forever.

Put a slightly different way, this passage teaches us that, “situations of weakness open believers’ lives to the power of Christ, giving them a way to participate in his death and resurrection. Such circumstances are times when Christ’s power may enter

and become manifest: “When I am weak, then I am strong” (Ellington).<sup>6</sup> This quote begins to describe the concept of cruciformity—the idea that part of the Christian life of faith is to allow our lives to be shaped by the suffering and death of the cross in a way that makes us more like Christ. New Testament scholar Scot McKnight has suggested that an even greater, more holistic call for Christians is that of Christiformity—conforming our lives not just to the cross, but to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.<sup>7</sup> When we listen to the words of Paul, when we view the story of Jesus in its entirety and acknowledge the living Spirit of Jesus with us in the present age, we realize that the ultimate manifestation of the power of God is found in the miracle of the resurrection. It is here that God’s power is made perfect in the midst of suffering and death. As a result, the more that we allow our lives to be conformed to Christ, the more we will experience the power and grace of His presence even in the midst of weakness, hardship, and calamity.

## CONCLUSION

In the Roman world in which Paul lived, there was something called the *cursus honorum*, or path of glory. This was the set of customs and expectations by which individuals strove to bring themselves honor, glory, and higher standing within society. When Paul wrote 2 Corinthians, he understood the game that they were playing and flat out refused to play along. In discussing the concept of Christiformity, McKnight points out that this kind of striving never goes out of style. Indeed, our churches are filled with individuals on America’s *cursus honorum*. What might the church look like if we rejected the *cursus honorum* of health, wealth, and career advancement, and instead embraced Christiformity? How might our impact on society and the world be greater than it currently is?

This is by no means an easy task, but the good news is that we are not on our own. As Christians, may we, like Paul, realize that our sufferings and our thorns, our hardships and our failures, are

not signs that God has left us, but opportunities for us to turn once again to the one who experienced ultimate suffering. We know that the desolation of the cross is not the end of the story, for in the resurrection, the power of Jesus is victorious over the powers of sin and death. May we rise to the challenge before us, rejecting the expectations of the world by embracing Christofor-mity and seeking contentment in Jesus even in the midst of hard-ship and persecution. For when we are weak, the power of Christ will dwell in us. Only then will we truly be strong.

## Notes

1. David E. Garland, "Paul's Apostolic Authority: The Power of Christ Sustaining Weakness (2 Corinthians 10–13)," *Review & Expositor* 86.3 (1989): 380.
2. Ernest Best, *Second Corinthians*, Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987), 116.
3. Raymond F. Collins, *Second Corinthians*, Paideia (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2013), 240.
4. Scott J. Hafemann, *2 Corinthians: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2000), 465.
5. Dustin W. Ellington, "Not Applicable to Believers? The Aims and Basis of Paul's 'I' in 2 Corinthians 10–13," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 131.2 (2012): 333.
6. Ellington, "Not Applicable to Believers?" 336.
7. Scot McKnight, "The Culture-Making Youth Leader." Recorded May 3, 2018 in Malibu, CA. Pepperdine Bible Lectures podcast.

## CHAPTER 7.

# LOOKING TO CHRIST: DISCIPLESHIP IN SUFFERING

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### PHILIPPIANS 3:7-14

PAUL C. MOLDOVAN

*But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. <sup>8</sup> What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. <sup>10</sup> I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup> and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. <sup>12</sup> Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. <sup>13</sup> Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, <sup>14</sup> I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. ~ Philippians 3:7-14 (NIV)*

## INTRODUCTION

The walk to school is one mile, and hot potatoes fill the pockets of many students due to the blistering cold of winter. During class a teacher asks anyone who believes in a “creator” to stand up. Some students stand, some students don’t. Those who *are* standing are ridiculed for their “backwards” views. This is communist Romania, and one of the students standing is my father.

In a different town, a small group is making its way to a prayer gathering. The journey is long, and many people cordially ask where the group is headed. The group either misdirects, or does not engage in conversation. Those asking are suspected informants, as prayer meetings have been made illegal. This is communist Romania, and one of the children walking to the prayer meeting is my mother.

In such turbulent times many are afraid to turn to the one they should be able to trust at all times: their pastor. This is because many pastors have become informants who relay information to the secret police about where and when illegal prayer meetings are being held, and which people possess Christian literature. They inform in exchange for benefits, or because of threats and pressure from the secret police.

Philippians was not written with the past-persecuted Christians of Romania in mind, nor with the presently oppressed believers in China or parts of the Middle East. Still, common parallels can be made: the powers that be and Christians are at odds, society and Christians are at odds, and Christians live with great anxiety. There is a kinship between Paul, the persecuted Philippian Christians, and other persecuted Christians after Paul’s time even to the present day.

## SCRIPTURE

### **A Call to Discipleship (Philippians 2-3)**

Philippians has a different tone compared to many of Paul’s let-

ters, one that is especially warm. Besides this, it is filled with jubilant language. Words like “joy” and “rejoice” appear frequently, and there is a strong emphasis on discipleship.<sup>1</sup> Yet what makes Philippians special has not to do with what Paul is saying to his dear friends, but where he is saying it *from*. Paul does not proclaim “rejoice in all things” from a pulpit; he writes from a prison cell. Paul’s goal in writing this epistle is to get the Philippians to see their situation in a different light; to take on the perspective or “mindset” of Christ. For the apostle, this new perspective or new outlook is the lens through which all of life is viewed. It is only when one takes seriously this new lens in Paul that his words “rejoice always” are less ridiculous. Paul has been awakened to a new reality, which challenges Romans and Jews alike.

This new reality sees Jesus as Lord, which the Roman rejects; only *Caesar* is to be given such a title! The Jew rejects it also because this is the title reserved for God alone. Paul was once someone who not only rejected the lordship of Christ, but utterly opposed any who gave it credence. Yet when Paul saw the risen Christ, he also came face to face with a new reality and a restructuring of what he once held in esteem as *honorable* and what he once regarded as “rubbish.”

The Philippians have already taken on this new outlook and reordering of values, and yet are still having trouble fully living it out. This is where Philippians 2-3 comes in. By and large this is a call to discipleship, Paul’s personal “how to” guide. The Philippians do not need to be led by the hand, as perhaps the Corinthians did. The Philippians simply need to be pointed in the right direction. Paul offers them four resolutions that will make this new reality long-lasting, and will in turn create a vibrant servant-like community (in spite of persecution).

1. Look to Christ (and the Christ story as a model for community; Phil 2:1-14)
2. Look to those *like* Christ (as a model for individuals and communities; Phil 3:17)

3. Look to the *coming* of Christ (and the coming vindication, reward, and judgment; Phil 1:6, 10-11, 28)
4. Look to the *Spirit* of Christ (for present empowerment; Phil 1:19)

Following the Christ story (which describes Christ as *emptying* himself), Paul turns the Philippians' attention to *himself* where he describes how *he* is like Christ: "But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you" (Phil. 2:17, NIV). Paul also has become like Christ in his willingness to empty himself for the sake of others, and this Christlikeness is what makes the apostle-in-chains a worthy model to mirror.

Paul does not allow the Christ story to be theoretical. Rather, he immediately points out how to apply the Christ story and live it out: the Philippian believers are to look to those *like* Christ. While it is important to look and behold the wonder of Christ and what he has done, we are also in constant need of flesh-and-blood examples of what it means to be Christ-like, and need the Christ story fleshed out in tangible ways.

With the Christ story fresh in their minds, and with Paul's words to look to those *like* Christ (Timothy, Epaphroditus, and Paul), Paul now turns the Philippians' attention to his *own* story which has some similarities and parallels to the Christ story.

In Philippians 3, Paul draws up a brief yet telling biographical sketch. Here, Paul is noting his descent from glory as a prominent Pharisee, and into the depths of shame (i.e. following a crucified Messiah who not only died, but suffered "even death on a cross"). Yet what Paul once held as honorable (his pursuit of believers and his crusade to stop their message), he now holds as shameful. It is now the highest honor to proclaim the message of Christ and call it, in fact, "good news."

### **A New Reality (Philippians 3:7-14)**

With constant references to Christ in these verses, Paul comes

off as one who is Christ-obsessed.<sup>2</sup> Here we are introduced to *the supremacy and worth of Christ and knowing him*. Before his Damascus experience, Paul was also Christ-obsessed. Yet Paul pursued Christ-followers to *imprison* them. The Paul revealed in Philippians (who has taken on a new outlook) now writes “honor such people” (Phil 2:29).

While Paul previously pursued the Church to destroy it (Phil 3:6), he now pursues Christ to know him (Phil 3:12-14).<sup>3</sup> Paul once regarded Christ and his cross as no more than “dung.” However, in light of Paul’s new outlook, he presently regards this very thing as treasure. In Philippians 3:8, Paul uses language of loss and gain. What was once highly regarded by Paul as ultimate, he now sees as “dung” or “rubbish.” God has revealed to Paul true reality, and taken the blinders off. To Paul, what was once gain is now loss, and vice versa. Perhaps it would do us well to enter the shoes of Paul and ask, “*What did Paul really lose when he became associated with Christ?*”

The message of a crucified Messiah was fiercely rejected, because Messiahs are not supposed to die. Messiahs don’t die at the hands of “dogs” (the uncircumcised), and they certainly don’t die a slave’s death, and the death of a false king. Therefore, those who accepted Jesus as Messiah more than likely put a serious strain on their relationships. This means that when Paul, a prominent Pharisee who many admired, pledges allegiance to Christ, his past friendships are severed. There is a social stench when it comes to those who follow a crucified Messiah, and Paul has entered this community that reeks to both Jews and Gentiles (given that it hits a nerve by going against Jewish and Roman sensibilities). Yet in contrast to regarding “Christianity” as dung (like the rest of the world), Paul insists that Christ is really of highest value.

To Paul, Christ is the source of Paul’s righteousness. Paul notes that, in his past, his righteousness was found in Torah-keeping with the emphasis on *self* (Phil 3:9). It must be said that Paul did not view Torah as evil; far from it! Paul seems to be dealing with

the fact that self-dependence is incompatible with life in Christ (that is, a life found in God). Paul, before his Damascus experience, describes his past self as a man full of zeal and passion, and yet we must avoid the mistake of thinking that God took this zeal away. His zeal remained intact, but was greatly redirected. Paul previously had been running and looking towards what was ahead: the prize of the Church and its message being snuffed out once and for all. Paul *presently* “presses on” to know Christ and know him fully.

## REFLECTION

The suffering that the Philippians and Paul are experiencing (shame and pressure for their association with a crucified Messiah) is not to be confused with suffering that is common to humanity, Christian or otherwise. How, then, can Paul’s letter apply to Christians who are not specifically going through hostile persecution like that of the Philippians? It applies to us whenever we might be shamed and shunned for our association with and allegiance to Christ and what he stands for.

Paul turns the Philippians’ minds to the great *past* of what Christ has done (Phil 2:5-11), the *present* and what Christ is doing through humans (enabling those like Timothy, Epaphroditus, Paul, and the Philippian believers themselves to adopt a self-sacrificial attitude), and the anticipated *future* return of Jesus (and the reward and punishment Jesus will bring). In the Philippians’ shame, they are to look to the Spirit of Christ, who gives them strength in the darkest of circumstances.

In looking to the Christ story, we are called to replicate communally the character and nature found in Jesus: to serve others without reserve. Though Christ’s lowliness is at odds with the way our world tends to operate (with its heavy *survival-of-the-fittest* atmosphere), it remains the model by which we are to judge our community’s health. The Christ story also brings out the normalcy of suffering for those who follow God’s path. Christ’s obedience to God inevitably brought about his shameful slave’s

death (i.e., *because* he was faithful, he suffered). The Christ story informs those who pledge allegiance to Christ that, “If the Lord of the universe suffered, then it is not abnormal that his subjects suffer as well.”<sup>4</sup> We are to look to those who have taken on the *mindset* or *outlook* of Christ (which often upsets cultural norms), and to those who are empowered by the Spirit of Christ.

After Paul calls upon the Philippians to imitate him, he proceeds to talk about “enemies of the cross” (Phil 3:18) who are bent on self-gratification, self-dependence, and self-glory (Phil 3:19). The implication is that those like Christ are to be imitated, and the behavior of those who live *opposite* of Christ’s self-emptying are to be avoided, as such people are headed towards “destruction” (Phil 3:19).

### **Looking to the Coming of Christ**

What separates Paul from some of his present contemporaries (such as the Stoics) is that while they both urge contentment in suffering, for Paul vindication for the sufferer is guaranteed.

When guaranteed vindication is taken seriously, Paul’s jubilant tone while in chains is no longer absurd. This is because Paul’s resolution is rooted in the fact that God guarantees vindication and reward for him, and for the Philippians as well. The work that God begins in communities will carry on until completion in the day of the Lord (Phil 1:6), regardless of suffering (as real as the suffering is). Paul looks forward to the day of the Lord, as Paul feels that he has thus far run well (enabled by God’s gift/grace). Paul hopes to stir in the Philippians a resolve to also run well so that they will have confidence akin to his when Christ returns and his Lordship is finally acknowledged by all (Phil 2:9-11).

When we look to the Christ story, we see his vindication. And the implication is that we too will be vindicated when we suffer for our allegiance to Christ. When we look also to the day of the Lord, we are greatly reminded of promised vindication for the suffering believer on account of Christ. Though the classic song

“The Old Rugged Cross” was likely not written with persecution in mind, Paul understood these words well before they were written: “I will cherish the old rugged cross, ‘til my trophies at last I lay down. I will cling to the old rugged cross, and exchange it someday for a crown.”

### Looking to the Spirit of Christ

Paul does not write statements while in chains such as “rejoice always” because he is self-dependent or even self-disciplined. Rather, Paul finds his strength in God. More than that, the joy Paul speaks of is not possible without the empowering presence of God.

Paul makes a point in 1 Corinthians that his preaching is quite weak, and that the conversion of the Corinthians is evidence that it was actually God who did the work rather than Paul’s efforts (1 Cor 2:1-5). Using this same line of reasoning, Paul’s response to his suffering for Christ is evidence of God’s working in Paul, as God’s strength once again shows up in human weakness. In Paul’s weakness we find “a demonstration of the Spirit’s power” (1 Cor 2:4, NIV).

Paul turns the Philippians’ minds to the great past of what Christ has done (the Christ story), the present and what Christ is doing through humans, and the anticipated future return of Jesus (and the reward and punishment Jesus will bring). In their shame the Philippians are to look to the Spirit of Christ in expectation for empowerment. The centrality of Christ for persecuted believers is greatly stressed by Paul, who suffers firsthand but also experiences “joy” in the midst of it *because* of his constant looking to Christ.

### CONCLUSION

Paul is certainly not one to advocate for a Christianity stripped of hardship (a form of Christianity on the rise in some circles). At the same time, Paul never advocates for believers running straight into the arms of danger (i.e. suffering for the sake of

suffering). Paul can be jubilant and sound triumphant while in extremely dire situations because he has learned “the secret” of being content (as many persecuted Christians after him would also discover). Paul’s contentment is never found in himself but in Paul’s constant *looking-to-Christ*. It is because of Paul’s continual looking-to-Christ that his reality and ways of thinking about honor and shame have greatly shifted—not just temporarily, but for the long haul. The now-seasoned apostle in chains was (at the time of writing this epistle) “In prison...at pains to comfort the free.”<sup>5</sup>

### **What This Does Not Mean: Paul and Grief**

It is far too easy to gather from all this that Paul is anti-grief.<sup>6</sup> This is simply not the case. Paul advocates elsewhere that we enter the suffering of others by “grieving with those who grieve” (Rom 12:15). Paul was very much an emotional being who “longed for the Philippians with the affections of Christ Jesus” (Phil 1:8), and who was brought to tears when it came to “enemies of the cross” (Phil 3:18).

### **What Does Paul Have to Say to Modern Persecuted Communities?**

A mindset, or outlook, like Christ’s is not sustainable without looking to Christ (looking to his past story, to those he is presently transforming, to his future coming and reign, and to his present Spirit for personal and collective enablement). While Paul found the “secret to being content in any situation” (Phil 4:12), his contentment was not rooted in self-sufficiency, since it is *Christ* who gave him strength (Phil 4:13). The implication is that the Spirit of Christ comes alongside us in our suffering to empower us, and we are not left to our own devices (and strength) when suffering for Christ.

Pastor Richard Wurmbrand was one of many who was tortured for his faith in communist Romania. He notes that it was not just while performing his “church duties” as pastor that he experienced deep union with Christ, but especially in a prison

cell. Over fourteen years he was interrogated for the names of leaders in the Underground Church. He, like Paul, did not credit self-dependence or self-discipline. Wurmbrand learned the secret of being content in any situation, and it had everything to do with looking to Christ, and with a new outlook that only Christ's Spirit brings. Wurmbrand writes:

We of the Underground Church have no cathedrals. But is any cathedral more beautiful than the sky of heaven to which we looked when we gathered secretly in forests? The chirping of birds took the place of the organ. The fragrance of flowers was our incense. And the shabby suit of a martyr recently freed from prison was much more impressive than priestly robes. We had the moon and stars as candles. The angels were our acolytes who lit them.<sup>7</sup>

We find the spirit of Paul very much alive in Christians past and present who suffer because of their allegiance to Christ. The persecuted can say with confidence that the "lords" and "saviors" are but imitations, their power only illusory, and their rule temporary. Those under the thumb of their oppressors can be prophetic in this sense since they, like the prophets of old, look with great anticipation and confidence to the day of the Lord. This is because the day of the Lord is also the day of vindication for them and the suffering people of God.

Unity is a nonnegotiable for Paul, but how much more so when the people of God are suffering? In other words, the Philippians need each other *especially* through terrible crisis. They are to cherish each other *especially* through common suffering. Paul's message to modern communities undergoing shame because of Christ might then look something like this: *Look to Christ, maintaining a community that mirrors his serving nature.*

## Notes

1. I am referring here to the aspect of following Christ in community, and emulating those *like* Christ (once again, in *community*). There is, of course, a personal dimension to discipleship, but when "personal"

becomes “private,” we have then created a discipleship completely foreign to the NT.

2. “Christ” appears six times (Phil. 3:7-9, 12, 14), and *autos* (or “him/his”) appears multiple times (see verses 9-10 where *autos* occurs 5x).
3. The Greek word *diōkō* is the same word Paul uses in Phil 3:6 to describe his past of pursuing the Church, and to describe his present pursuing or “pressing on” towards Christ in Phil 3:12 and 14.
4. Similar to Jesus’ point in Matthew 10:16-25, and especially vv. 24-25: “The student is not above the teacher, nor a servant above his master. ...If the head of the house has been called Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household!” (NIV)
5. Mark Strom, *Reframing Paul: Conversation in Grace and Community* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 162.
6. Anti-grief is by and large the Stoic response to suffering.
7. Richard Wurmbrand, *Tortured For Christ* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2017), 112.

## CHAPTER 8.

# CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN THE EARTHLY CITY

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## PHILIPPIANS 3:17-4:1

### ALEX FINKELSON

*Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. <sup>18</sup> For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. <sup>19</sup> Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. <sup>20</sup> But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>21</sup> He will transform the body of our humiliation[c] that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. I Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. ~ Philippians 3:17-4:1*

## INTRODUCTION

### Sorrow, the Existential Threat

We do not face suffering with the strength of our body. We do not face suffering with the dexterity of our mind. We do not even face suffering with the longevity of our will. Suffering is resisted

by all of these, but suffering achieves its deleterious ends primarily by attacking a more fundamental part of us: our identity. Suffering interrogates us. It asks us to whom we belong, and in whom, or in what, do we live and move and have our being. What makes suffering evil, in the words of theologian John Swinton, is that the questions it poses can draw us away from God and from our true identities in the loving Creator.<sup>1</sup>

The destabilizing and realigning effects pain and loss have on human identity are therefore not necessarily evil. False identity is sometimes washed away in a flood of pain.

My first experience with identity-threatening suffering was in college. I hurt my back in a weightlifting accident the summer before my sophomore year. The injury generated a piercing and chronic pain down my right leg. For a few days I expected the pain to subside, but it refused. The suffering was not at all limited to physical pain. For the following year I was grieved by the uncertainty of whether I would or could be healed. More than this though, I was grieved by the forced truncation of my identity. Because I could only stand for short periods my active lifestyle was stripped away. Because I was in pain my attitude soured and despaired. Because I needed comfort I could not be the one who was needed by others. Much of what had made me *me* was now out of my reach.

It was through this ordeal, however, that I came to a deeper knowledge of myself and of my God. When I could no longer act and feel in the ways I was accustomed, I realized that my identity did not lie in what I did or what I felt. I realized that I had a great need for God as crafter and sustainer of my identity whether I was in pain or not.

## SCRIPTURE

### **Paul Against the World**

I believe my very limited experiences with chronic pain and with the loss of the supposed foundations of my identity are reflected

in the apostle Paul's conversion. Paul underwent a swift and severe identity crisis when he met Jesus alive and exalted by God on the road to Damascus. Paul's identity as a Torah-observant Jew—as a man far surpassing his peers along the honorable path devised by first-century Israel—was judged and found wanting. The divine calling of Paul was therefore first a divine condemnation of those prestigious stones upon which Paul built his identity. God's judgement of Paul's identity was accompanied by his loss of sight. God in effect reduced Paul's physical status and ability to match Paul's—unbeknownst to him—desperate spiritual status and ability as a persecutor of God's Anointed.

When Paul's sight was restored, his identity was transformed. Paul was still a bold, gentle, and sometimes fierce man, but he was no longer bound to the system of honor and identity found in elite first-century Judaism—a system more concerned with the accolades of men than with the approval of God, a system of hypocrisy and of mercilessness.<sup>2</sup> In the course of a moment, Paul was delivered from one dominion into another. He abandoned his post as a slave to human approval and offered himself as a slave to God. Through this identity transfer Paul was re-equipped for a new mission: the rescue of those who still lived in darkness. Paul became a liberator, an iconoclast of every system of worldly power, both pagan and Jewish. More than this, though, Paul was entrusted to plant and water the seeds of God's gospel—to form and maintain the churches. This task at its most fundamental level constituted the instillation of Christian identity, an identity comprising a self-concept, a purpose, and a hope shaped by the crucified and risen Christ.

Paul and many early Christians experienced discomfort within pagan and Jewish societies due to their new identification with Christ. The Christian communities were beset by Jews, by pagans, by the Roman empire, and by evil spirits all on account of the beliefs and behaviors that grew out of their newfound identity in Christ. The Christian convert was not just taking on new beliefs, she was relinquishing her social capital. Paul abandoned

not only a comfortable life within elite Judaism, he left a pleasurable and prestigious life (Philippians 3:4-6). Why then did these believers voluntarily take on marginalization and suffering?

The new identity bestowed upon Paul and his followers was worthy of acceptance first and foremost because it reflected the truth about God. God truly had raised Jesus from the dead and given him authority to judge the world. In the light of this truth, the life of honor approved by the one true God was found in neither the pagan nor the Jewish systems.

All of this—the unavoidable truth of the gospel, Paul’s identity crisis on the road to Damascus, and Paul’s previous life of triumph within a worldly system of honor—form the context for Paul’s letter to the Philippians, a letter written from a Roman prison. As Paul waits to be judged by the standard contrived by pagan imperialism, he drafts an indictment *contra mundum* in Philippians 3. Here in 3:17-4:1 he presents most succinctly the Christian understanding of suffering.

Brothers and sisters, all of you must become imitators of me by paying close attention to those who live according to the example you have in us. For, as I have told you often, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. I now say it again as I weep. Their destination is destruction, their god is in the stomach, and their glory is in their shame. They contemplate earthly things. But our political allegiance lies with Heaven, from which we await a rescuer, Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation into the likeness of the body of his glory by the power that enables him to dominate all things. Therefore my brothers, those loved and longed for, my joy and my crown, stand in the Lord in this way, beloved.<sup>3</sup>

Our identity is the story we tell about ourselves. It is a story that provides answers to questions concerning our past, present, and future; our origin, our purpose, and our hope. Paul in Philippians 3:17-4:1 contrasts two such opposing stories, two opposing identities. He first warns of the story that once roused his own behavior, an identity now maintained by his opponents. Who are these opponents? Based on Paul’s experience with Jewish “pseudo-Christians” in Corinth and Galatia, we would be right to

identify those he calls “enemies of the cross” as the familiar sect of Judaizing Christians.<sup>4</sup> Verse 19 alludes satirically to the Jewish dietary laws and circumcision these evangelists prided themselves in.<sup>5</sup> It would not be fitting, however, to limit the target of Paul’s polemic to only those Jews who wished to place the yoke of the Torah on Gentiles. Paul sets his sights on all those who seek after earthly glory—Jew, Christian, and pagan alike. Although these opponents are commended by the world for their acts of self-seeking, the destination prepared for them is destruction. They work for an earthly glory that, when tested by the fires of God’s apocalyptic judgement, will render no reward. Their origin is an earthly system, their purpose is to satisfy their desires, and their hope is death.

Those who are allied to the cross of Christ, on the other hand, are on a separate path. Like Paul as he sits in prison, they experience a painful and humiliating existence within cultures of power. They are dominated by others just as Christ was also. At the same time, their future is not destruction but rather rescue from their current condition. What enables these “friends of the cross” to suffer in the present, is this assurance of future glory and salvation. An identity “in Christ,” that is, a life that identifies fully with Christ’s voluntary debasement, is able to withstand pain induced upon the body, the mind, and the will. By entering into the story of Christ’s suffering, the believer awaits the glorious culmination of that story.<sup>6</sup> Their origin is a heavenly economy, their purpose identification with the suffering Christ, and their hope is dignity and life. We have here encapsulated by Paul the two stories that make up the two identities—the earthly man and the heavenly man.

## REFLECTION

### **A Tale of Two Cities: Joyful Sorrow in the Kingdom of God**

Long after the ministry and passion of the apostle Paul, Saint

Augustine of Hippo would sound a similar note in his work *City of God*:

Two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. The former, in a word, glories in itself, the latter in the Lord. For the one seeks glory from men; but the greatest glory of the other is God, the witness of conscience. The one lifts up its head in its own glory; the other says to its God, "Thou art my glory, and the lifter up of mine head."<sup>7</sup>

The two cities present in Augustine's thought represent the communal life of the two identities outlined by Paul in Philippians 3. Two thousand years later, the earthly city and the systems of worldly power remain still the default loci of human existence. Identities that maintain human origin in materialism, human purpose in epicureanism, and human hope in the trappings of the present age have exerted a gravitational pull on the broken and sinful heart in all times and all places. The strength of such stories, I will argue, lies primarily in their ability to dampen and prevent pain.

My upbringing, I think, provides an example of how the fear of suffering draws us into thought-patterns opposed to Christ. I was brought up in a non-Christian home. My parents worked extraordinarily hard to provide private education and luxuries for me and my brother. In high school and college my parents pushed me to pursue lucrative career fields like medicine and law despite my hesitations. Like many parents, mine wanted me to be wealthy and respected. They were fearful that unless they provided me with the skills required to achieve this I would live a life of suffering. I, however, had a growing desire and sense of calling to study and teach the Bible. Years of unhappily following my parents' wishes damaged the relationship I had with them.

Though I love my parents dearly and our relationship has since been repaired, I think this part of my life demonstrates to an extent the connection between our fear of suffering and the ways of thinking instilled by the world. As was true of many pagans

and Jews in Paul's time, my parents considered the remedy for pain to be the accumulation of honor and money. There is of course much to be said for wise financial planning and hard work, but regardless of what we do, suffering cannot be eradicated. We can never fully escape our condition. In the same way, because the believer's identity must conform to the suffering servant, the goal of the Christian life and of the church cannot be security, comfort, or pleasure. We must rather strive for an openness to suffering and a readiness to enter into the suffering of another.

In sum then, the word God speaks to us through Philippians is a call to repudiate all the ways we mitigate and ignore and medicate the pains of life. Paul does not leave us with merely a calling, however. He is in the business of identity formation, the creation of persons equipped with the hope required to face suffering without being destroyed by it. We remember Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 4:8-10: "we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies."

The hope Paul provides his followers begins and ends with the story of Christ's voluntary entrance into suffering and subsequent resurrection. Though Christ was in the form of God, that is, rightly having immunity to the brokenness of fallen humanity, he chose to take up Adam's lot under the curse of death. The incarnate God unexpectedly and paradoxically rejected not suffering itself, but rather those walls we erect to protect us from it. Christ became radically vulnerable and present to both the hurt inflicted upon him and the hurt inflicted upon others. Jesus and his suffering followers after him found in this voluntary debasement a joy and a peace that surpassed all understanding. Paul found in his Christ-like pain a knowledge of and an intimacy with Christ (Philippians 3:7-11). He also found a glorious future hope in the resurrection of the body. As Christians we are thus

obligated to lives of joyful suffering, of embracing pain when it comes in the service of Christ and others. Pain for the Christian is not only an opportunity to serve and be served, but to rejoice in sorrow. This is of course not a simple task and requires the disciplining of the mind, will, and body. Nor should we trivialize the terrifying and destructive power of loss. Nonetheless, the suffering Apostle of joy calls us to choose real joy, real life, and real hope in the incomprehensible way of the crucified Christ. I believe God will work this in us by shifting the whole of our identity, by removing us from the story told by the power structures of the world, and placing us into the story of the one who chose to face the suffering of the world not by holding tightly to his power and invulnerability, but by becoming what was small and weak and sick.

## CONCLUSION

One of the unfortunate things I have noticed about myself is that I am uncomfortable with the suffering of others. When I am listening to a friend struggle I sometimes wish I could just remove myself from the situation. I often don't know how to fix the problem, how to end the suffering. Isn't that what a friend is supposed to do? I'm not so sure anymore. I am also aware that my reaction to my own pain is similar. I just want to get away from it. I ignore it and I cling to the things that make me feel secure: things like money, solitude, my reputation, etc. I have learned to do a decent job of covering up my pain with these. Also, I have learned to make the quick fix, to never let suffering affect me.

This is not how I believe the gospel is to be practiced. For believers, the story of Christ's crucifixion and exaltation teaches us that a divine order overlays this ephemeral world of illusion, that pain and loss and rejection are not permanent, that joy and intimacy with Christ are found when we become vulnerable as Christ became vulnerable. This is the life I desire to live and the life I have tasted in times of suffering.

## Notes

1. John Swinton, *Raging With Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 57.
2. Jesus' rebuke of the Pharisees in Matthew 23 diagnoses clearly the sickness plaguing this social system.
3. My translation.
4. Paul's emphatic "For it is we who are the circumcision" in response to those he calls "mutilators of the flesh" leaves little doubt as to whom he has in mind (Philippians 3:2-3).
5. Paul Holloway, *Philippians* (Minneapolis, MN.: Fortress Press, 2017), 179.
6. The Lukan woes and beatitudes provide a similar eschatological contrast between those who seek a present consolation from men and those who seek a future consolation from God (Luke 6:20-26).
7. Saint Augustine, *The City of God, Volume II* (Los Angeles, CA.: Andesite Press, 2017), 48.

## CHAPTER 9.

### DON'T WORRY, BE HAPPY!

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#### PHILIPPIANS 4:6-20

DR. NIJAY K. GUPTA

<sup>6</sup> Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup> Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. <sup>9</sup> Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. <sup>10</sup> I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. <sup>11</sup> Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. <sup>12</sup> I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. <sup>13</sup> I can do all things through him who strengthens me. <sup>14</sup> In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress. <sup>15</sup> You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia,

*no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone.* <sup>16</sup> *For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once.* <sup>17</sup> *Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account.* <sup>18</sup> *I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.* <sup>19</sup> *And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.* <sup>20</sup> *To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.* ~ (Phil. 4:6-20 NRSV)

## INTRODUCTION

My second-grade daughter recently “discovered” the old 1980s song, “Don’t Worry, Be Happy.” (If you don’t know it, it is remarkably catchy.) So, she has been walking around the house repeating “Don’t Worry, Be Happy” in a sing-songy voice. What a misery she will have spared herself if she learns, from a tender age, to manage and dispel worry and stress. Nearly three-quarters of adults today admit to having experienced at least one symptom of stress in the last month;<sup>1</sup> and anxiety disorders are on the rise affecting 20% of Americans.<sup>2</sup> Looking at a statistic is one thing, but the matter is also very personal to me.

In the fall of 2018 I was experiencing some strange sensations in my chest, and on a daily basis for several days, I felt dizzy and lightheaded. Some days it felt like my heart was going to beat right out of my chest. At first I thought it was too much caffeine—I live in Portland, Oregon after all! But after I reduced my coffee intake, I still had problems. The issue subsided for a few days, but then came back more seriously to the point that I thought I was having a heart attack. I called a cardiologist friend and he said—*go to the ER right now*. So I did. I was not having a heart attack. I had an *anxiety attack*. From a purely physiological perspective, my heart was “fine.” But I was definitely *not fine*. I did not, at that time, think I was dealing with any major stress issues. But the reality is that life is full of anxiety-provoking issues that pop up constantly. Looking back, I was overloaded, and it came

to a boiling-over point where my body reacted to get my attention.

For most people in my kind of situation, “meds” is not the real answer.<sup>3</sup> Some stressful issues are bound to rock the boat of anyone—such as dealing with cancer or being assaulted. But there are lots of little problems that come our way and how we deal with them has a lot more to do with how we think about life, the world, and in *Whose* care we are, than anything else.

## SCRIPTURE

Here is where Paul comes in. On several occasions in his letters, Paul talks about the challenging circumstances he had to face in his ministry: severe torture; shipwrecked and lost, adrift in the open sea; the threat of robbers; hunted by his fellow countrymen; extended times of thirst and hunger; bitter cold; and harsh imprisonments (cf. 2 Cor 6:4-10; 11:24-28). Just one of these issues would be enough for me to sink desperately into despair. But Paul found a way to be resilient in hardship—and even joyous and happy! And not the superficial, plastic-smile kind of happy, but a genuine, deep joy that transcends temporary circumstances (2 Cor 4:16-18). This comes out clearly in his letter to the Philippians. Paul, prisoner of Jesus Christ (chained to a guard, awaiting trial and sentencing), took the time to write the Philippians a letter of encouragement *for them*. And in that letter, he shares with them his own “secret” of joy. Paul addresses this most directly in Philippians 4:6-20.

Here Paul shows awareness that there has been some kind of disruption in the community. He calls a certain Euodia and a certain Syntyche (both women leaders in the church) to settle their disagreement and come together in unity (4:2-3). We don’t actually know what they were arguing about, but the fact that it is publicized in this letter means that it was deeply affecting the church community. One reasonable guess is that they took two different positions on whether or not to continue to support Paul’s mission and ministry. They were financially stretched as

a church, and the thought of giving what little they had left to aid Paul would have been distressing. We know, in the end, that they *did* send aid to Paul in his imprisonment (4:10, 18). But the question of ongoing support for Paul may have been a bone of contention. In general, we get the impression the Philippian believers were overwhelmed with problems. They experienced local persecution for their faith (Phil 1:24-30), which affected their personal faith, and other areas of their lives – such matters could have led to people losing jobs or business partnerships when they were identified as followers of Jesus.<sup>4</sup>

So, in Philippians 4:6a, we find Paul (in chains), telling the church in Philippi: *don't worry, be happy!* Technically, he writes, "Do not be anxious about anything." Now, Paul was a realist, and he knew that problems did arise, but he goes on to say, *trust God to care for you. Come to God "with thanksgiving" (4:6b).* And what will God do? Take your problems away? No, he doesn't write that. Paul himself was not in prison praying for release to alleviate his suffering or stress. His hope and prayer was that God would be exalted and given glory through his life, whether he lived or died (Phil 1:20).

What God promises to give, writes Paul, is *peace* (Phil 4:8). Divine peace is a certain internal state of "wellness" that can only come from the Most High God. Sometimes my kids get scared at night that there might be a prowler. And I tell them, "Listen, I am your dad and I am in charge of you; I set the alarm and locked the doors. My job is to keep you safe and happy; your job is to be a kid and not worry about these things. I worry so you don't have to." In a way, God says that to us: *let me do the worrying; you be a kid.*

Paul goes on to encourage the Philippians *not* to dwell on their fears, concerns, and the "bad" goings-on in life, but to fill their minds with what is true, respectable, just, pure, lovely, and excellent (4:8). In a sense, Paul is saying that peace is a state of mind. We can consume our thoughts with "what ifs," or we can soak in all the beauty and goodness that is in the world.

When Paul turns to his relationship with the Philippians (4:10-20), he talks about how he has dealt with stress in his life. He divulges his share of troubles. Though he has experienced “high highs,” he also remembers major times of depletion and need (4:12). But God has taught him a “secret” or “mystery”: the trick is *not* trying to manipulate your circumstances to make life easier—although there is nothing wrong with relieving stress and pain.<sup>5</sup> The “secret” is fully entrusting yourself to God; hence the famous “I am able to do all things through the one who strengthens me” (Phil 4:12). Now, Paul is not talking here about winning a sports game, climbing a mountain, or fulfilling your dream to be a movie star. He is talking about finding contentment, peace, and joy in daily life, in an even and consistent manner, whether you are having a good day or a bad day.

Of course, Paul still needed help from others—thus his appreciation for the Philippians’ aid package—but his happiness was not *dependent* on it. Many scholars have made a connection between Paul’s teachings about anxiety and peace in Philippians 4:6-20, and Jesus’ teachings about worrying in the Sermon on the Mount (6:25-34). Jesus tells his disciples not to worry about life (food, clothing, shelter). Other creatures, like birds, live freely and lightly, depending on the providence of God (6:26). One of my favorite rhetorical questions in the Bible follows: “Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?” (6:27). Jesus’ point is that chronic worry points to a lack of placing oneself in the care of the gracious God (6:30). Jesus says, *pagans act all stressed out and worried; God’s people should know better* (6:32).

So, what should we do? “Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (6:33). Put simply, Jesus teaches his disciples to live one day at a time, living simply and faithfully in God’s care, trusting his goodness and the “safety net” of his provision. That doesn’t discount that God’s people *will* go through hard times. The Book of Hebrews gives a blood-curdling list of saints who had to face horrors due to their faith: torture, beatings, imprisonment, ston-

ing, stabbing, mockery, exile, and isolation—some were even “sawn in two” (Heb 11:35-38), yikes! But Jesus says, *why worry? What are you so afraid of? Follow me and be happy!*

## REFLECTION

Reading the teachings of Paul and Jesus on peace and happiness is easy, but putting them into practice in a meaningful way today is very difficult. When I look at what Paul offers in Philippians, I come away with this counsel.

*Face your worries.* Paul does not come right out and say this, but by telling them not to worry about *anything*, I believe the first step is to address the full scope and depth of what we fear. I would suggest sitting down and writing out what worries us and causes anxiety, big and small.

*Count your blessings.* Next, it is helpful and important that we name the many blessings we have in life. When we experience low seasons, it can set a dark mood over everything. We can sit in despair and imagine nothing good happens to us, and everyone else seems to be happy and successful.<sup>6</sup> It helps to list all that we can be thankful for (Phil 4:6; 1 Thess 5:18).

*Turn to God.* Paul tells the Philippians: “let your requests be known to God” (4:6). This implies that God cares, and he wants to listen to us. He wants us to turn our worrying into conversation and prayer. Part of this process is releasing our cares into the capable hands of God. One way to do this is to write out a worry on a post-it note and put it in a prayer jar or prayer board. This can act as a symbolic “handing over” of the concern.

*Surround yourself with beauty.* Paul tells the Philippians to occupy their thoughts, not with worries and fears, but with good and beautiful things (4:8). My encouragement would be to take time each day, perhaps in the morning and at night, to “enjoy” something beautiful for at least a few minutes. It might be looking at inspiring art on the wall or listening to Yo-Yo Ma. I have three young kids so my days are very busy (and full of little worries), but on most days, I take a little extra time in the morning

to make myself a homemade latte. There is something elegant, relaxing, and enjoyable in the art of crafting a fine latte—the smells, tastes, and colors. These “beauty” moments might be relatively brief, but it helps me to take Paul’s advice seriously. Life is full of so much beauty and excellence; sometimes our busyness and worries can crowd out or cloud the glory that surrounds us daily. Hope and joy come in many shapes and sizes, and sometimes little joys can add up to a more contented life.

*Ask for help.* I am one of those kinds of people that does not like to ask for help. I don’t want to bother other people. I feel like things are often more efficient or convenient if I just “do it myself.” But more and more I am realizing that, if I don’t mind someone else asking *me* for help, I shouldn’t expect that others feel “put out.” We live in a culture of high independence, which can be good; however, one consequence is that it can seem intrusive to others if I ask for help. Sometimes it is our pride stopping us from asking. Note how Paul, a man in chains, is not really bashful about asking for help. He *knows* that the good life cannot be lived alone. Life and ministry require partnership. Everyone is bound to have times of abundance, and likewise times of lack. And humans were created to come together to help one another out (2 Cor 8:13-15). So, swallow your pride, and just ask. Of course, the other side of the coin is that you will need to reach out and help others willingly, too. I have moved (out of state) *so many times*, and it has been a rich blessing when colleagues and friends have stepped in to help with grunt work. Nowadays, I am eager to pitch in and help others who are moving, precisely because I realize how much easier it is when there are more hands.

## CONCLUSION

*How is my heart?* Thanks for asking. I’m doing all right. Worry is still a vice and weakness I face on a daily basis. But a big part of how I have changed in the last year has been *slowing down*. Some of my worries have come from pushing too hard in my

career—and for what? Fame? Money? Recognition? I am guessing some of my workaholic habits are actually hidden insecurities. I feel the need to “do more” to make myself feel important or special. But I can hear Paul and Jesus say—*don’t worry, be happy! Be thankful, stop and smell the roses (literally!), and follow Jesus one day at a time.*

*Do you suffer in anxiety and worries in such a way that it brings your day down? What will it take for you to be happy in life and thankful to God?*

I wish to leave you with a piece from the story of 14th-century Julian of Norwich, who lamented the havoc wreaked by sin and evil in the world. She wondered whether all could be “well” (whole, good, blessed) when the world was in such a troubled state. Wouldn’t the world have been so much better if God kept the world perfectly free from bad things? Jesus responded to her sweetly in a vision saying “It was necessary that there should be sin; but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.”<sup>7</sup> That is, Jesus told her that God’s peace and joy is far more powerful than any trouble caused by sin or evil. Nothing can withstand the flood of blessing that God has poured out, is pouring out, and will pour out to make all things “well.”

*Jesus, we turn to you as the joy-bringer and friend of the worried.*

## Notes

1. American Psychological Association, Stress in America: Generation Z (Stress in America™ Survey, 2018) <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2018/stress-gen-z.pdf>.
2. Tim Newman, "Anxiety in the West: Is it on the Rise?," *Medical News Today* (September 5th, 2018), <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/322877.php>.
3. I want to be careful to say there are people who have mental health problems where medication is necessary and healthy. I do not want, in any way, to dismiss or minimize the difficulties facing people in that situation.
4. See Peter Oakes, *Philippians: From People to letter* (Cambridge: Cam-

bridge University Press, 2001).

5. See 1 Cor 7:21; 1 Tim 5:23.
6. This seems to be the attitude and plight of the “older brother” in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:15-32).
7. See Dan Graves, Article #31, <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/incontext/article/julian>.

## BOOK COVER ART

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