

Thorns and Persecution

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Preacher: Derek Lamont

[0 : 00] So, but I want to look at this passage about Paul and his thorn in the flesh. Because I think it kind of hone in on the idea of persecution, but more to do with suffering, with Paul, the example in Paul.

And then I think we broaden that to see some principles as well. Because none of us here want suffering.

None of us like suffering. I hope not. I don't suppose any of us want it. And yeah, all of us suffer to greater or lesser degrees in different ways.

And we must never belittle someone's suffering. However, inconsequential it might seem to us, even in the light of what other people are going through.

But for us, there's not really any easy answers to the problem of evil and suffering. The Bible does give some very significant ones, but it doesn't give all the answers.

[1 : 00] So I think we're always going to be left, always going to be left with a degree of mystery. And as Christians, you're going to be left, and I'm going to be left with the importance of learning to hold on to Jesus' hand and trust Him, trust Him when we're going through difficulty or illness or loss or relational struggles or opposition at work or whatever it might be.

Because all of us will have come this evening into our church service, having wrestled with suffering to one degree or another, it can be personal, at a very kind of individual level.

And especially I'm thinking in context, because Paul's context here was in relation to his faith, was in relation to him being a Christian, believing, because you might have come to the place where you know and you understand the grace of God, you understand and rely on what Jesus has done for you.

You appreciate his declared and expressed love for you as revealed on his work on the cross, his sacrificial work on the cross.

You know you come tonight and you live your life as a Christian who knows you're forgiven. You know you're redeemed. You know you've got a great future. But doesn't the suffering stop?

[2 : 22] Doesn't the suffering stop for us then? Because of all these amazing things that are in our lives. Of what for us does happiness consist? What does it mean to be happy as a Christian when we're faced with all these difficulties in our ongoing?

What does blessing look like for us as Christians as we face more and more battles in our lives and maybe more battles since you became a Christian?

You may have been relatively suffering free until you became a Christian. And it seems that the difficulties of your life have become exacerbated and more real in coming to faith.

And you wrestle with that idea of your Christian faith, your relationship with Jesus and the suffering that you're going through. Or it may be the kind of broader idea of global suffering and evil and difficulties.

You know we would argue very strongly for a sovereign God. God who's sovereign over all things and a God who's a loving God. And you know the difficulty that that brings to many people.

[3 : 27] You see if your God is so loving and so powerful, why does He allow these things to happen? Why is there so many things? You say that evil has been defeated on the cross.

Wait, certainly doesn't seem like that. It doesn't seem that that is the case. And if you would argue again focusing on the Christian suffering, 34, 340 million Christians are reckoned to be facing deep persecution and discrimination in their lives.

How does that ring true for the Christian concept of God's love and God's grace? And that's before we even speak about all the overt darkness, evil and suffering we see around us.

So it's a kind of big area, isn't it? I'm just going to look, focus very much for a few minutes on Paul and what Paul says here and what we can take from that for ourselves from God's living word.

Because Paul's speaking here about suffering, he's talking about a thorn in the flesh. And he's explaining his situation. He's saying he's 14 years ago.

[4 : 38] Now we don't have all the details and we don't have the timeline and we don't know exactly when he prayed at what point for relief. But he saw 14 years ago, he saw incredible things.

He was taken up into heaven. He has ever seen what Paul has seen and he, it's so unique and so inexpressible that a lot of what he saw has not been repeated for us, although much of his epistles and his learning must have come at least in part from that journey into the nearer presence of the risen Jesus.

So he's told, he doesn't know how exactly it happened himself. He doesn't know whether it was in his body or out of his body, but he was taken into paradise and he saw inexpressible things.

Now as a result of that, it's utterly unique experience. He recognizes that he was tempted by that experience.

He was tempted to take real pride in it. That, well, there's nothing like that. Nobody liked me and nobody's seen what I've seen. Nobody's been into Jesus nearer presence in the way I have.

[5 : 49] No one's heard the kind of things that I've heard. And he may have been tempted to be more, think of himself as more special, more important than other people, to take credit for being someone that God privileged in this way.

And it could have made him proud and self-reliant and quite spiritually arrogant because of all that he'd seen. And so he realized that as a result of that, God allowed him to suffer.

He said so that he wouldn't become proud, so that he wouldn't rely on his own strength, he says that God gave him a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass him, to keep him from becoming conceited.

Three times he pled about that. But that is the reality of this very focused situation of suffering. And what did he learn from it?

Well, he learned, didn't he, that he wasn't God. He learned that really important lesson, that he wasn't the center of the universe, that God was.

[6 : 59] And he learned that God gifted suffering to him. You'll not often hear that. You'll not often hear that phrase that God gifted suffering to him.

But he says he was given this thorn in the flesh. Now there's great mystery in that, we know that. Because he says he was gifted a messenger of Satan.

God gifted him a messenger of Satan. What a strange thing to say. But isn't it the recognition of God's sovereignty at work where he even harnesses evil against itself for a higher purpose?

He harnesses evil temporarily against itself for a higher purpose. Now we don't know what that thorn was. There's been lots of conjecture about what the thorn was.

I'm not going to go into that because God doesn't reveal what it was. And if He doesn't reveal what it was, I don't think we're really to guess what it was. And it makes it easier to apply at a more wide level if we don't know exactly what it was because it may be that each of us at different times in our lives may be given a similar thorn in our flesh.

[8 : 20] But it was by divine design. And that's what's really important. God gifted the suffering to him. Remember that is very important. And remember too that it wasn't what he wanted.

Paul didn't want, three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me, whatever this particular suffering was that he faced in his life.

It wasn't what he wanted. And that's okay, isn't it? And it's good that he prayed about it, isn't it? And he asked repeatedly for it to be taken from him.

He persevered in pleading that this thorn be taken from him. But then he stopped praying about it. He stopped praying for the suffering to be taken from him.

Because he came to terms with God's answer, which was, no, it's going to stay with you.

[9 : 20] It's there for a reason. And it's there to keep you from becoming conceited and so that you recognize, and he gets this special answer, doesn't he?

My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. That's the great lesson. That's what he comes to terms with. He stops pleading and he starts delighting.

He starts being content and recognizing that God is the great craftsman who is at work in his life, working through some of his heart issues in order to bring him closer, to make him more dependent and to help him to recognize who he is.

Therefore, I will boast, he says, more gladly about my weaknesses so that Christ's power may rest in me, because Christ's power is what? What is Christ's power?

Is it muscles? Christ's power is his grace. Christ's power, Christ's strength is his grace.

[10 : 20] My grace is sufficient for you. It's my power and it's made perfect in your weakness. And so that is what Paul came to realize through this experience, that he got something better than healing or the end of the suffering that he was pleading for that it would be removed.

He got God. He got God's grace, which was real strength. And because that grace was an ongoing taste of the glory he'd had in heaven for these times that he'd been in heaven.

There's a puritan, I don't know which one it was, but he said, grace is young glory. And that's true. When we experience grace here in our lives, his touch in our heart, particularly in difficulty in suffering, it's the beginnings of understanding the beauty of what it means to be in glory and to be in Christ nearer presence.

And it's only as we come to terms eyeball to eyeball with sometimes the darkness in our own hearts, sometimes the darkness of sin generally, but usually particularly in our own experience that God is working through and working out in our lives.

When we're eyeball to eyeball with that, we begin to experience his grace and his forgiveness and his strength. Because very often what Paul was tempted to do was rely on his own strength, wasn't he?

[11 : 53] His own intelligence, his own experience, his own machoness, maybe. And yet he was encouraged to recognize that weakness, not relying on our own strength, is actually what brings us closest to God.

Now we see that whole principle as well, don't we, of God using evil against itself for a higher purpose, using Satan and his angels to do his bidding.

We see it most clearly and most powerfully in the cross, don't we? We see it in the garden, Gethsemane, where Jesus, he also pled three times, take this from me.

Take it from me. But he added, yet not my will, but yours be done. And of course, the act of the deepest and greatest evil that humanity has ever seen on the cross also becomes the stage for the greatest good that has ever been revealed.

Surely you've got in Colossians chapter 2 and verse 15 that Jesus desiried the powers and authorities, making a public spectacle of them, triumphant over them by the cross.

[13 : 19] Paradoxical reality of the deepest, darkest, most evil event in history becomes that place where God's greatness is most revealed as He triumphs over the cross.

And it's for us we recognize that when we recognize that in our own hearts and our own experiences and even through our own suffering, as Christians particularly, because we are Christians, then we find that that weakness that we experience throws us onto Jesus Christ and find there His safety, His love and His strength.

And that changes our perspective on suffering and difficulties in our lives. So very briefly, I think what is God teaching us or saying to us through this experience of Paul and what he went through?

I think he's reminding us tonight, whoever we are, whatever stage in life we're at, it's always good to turn to God. It's always good to turn to God.

It's always good to be pleaded, especially if you're suffering. And I'm not going to go through a litany of what suffering you might be going through this evening. I'm not going to presume on that.

[14 : 39] But whatever it is that you're challenged with, particularly in relation to your faith, particularly because maybe you are a Christian and it's on Christian grounds that you're struggling and battling.

It's Christian ground you're standing on and wrestling with about this suffering. It's good to turn to God, but please, not with a pre-packaged answer.

Not with the answer you want Him to give you, as maybe Paul did initially asking that it would be removed. Or even if we do ask for that, that we're open to His answer being different.

Because as Robyn reminded of this morning, it's very easy, isn't it, to misunderstand Jesus and to make Him like that political figure that he was talking about, that we want the political figures to do what we want, what we voted for them.

And I've accepted Jesus. I want Him to do now what I want. I want Him to be the kind of Savior that's good for me. And the difficulty with that is that we come to the place of blaming God and asking Him, well, what kind of love have you?

[15 : 56] What kind of care do you have over me? And you know, it's a good question, but not if we've already given God the answer. Not if we already think we know better than God about who He is and why He loves and what He's doing.

We need inner suffering to be prepared when we pray. We need to be ready for the answer to potentially be no.

And we need to work out if that is what He's saying to us. Have you ever done that? I wonder if I've ever done that. Actually wrestled with God and accepted in my wrestling through suffering that the answer is no.

But that He gives a better answer. You know, I've got this old Thompson Chain, NIV Bible that I've had for many years. It's a great...

We don't use Thompson Chain anymore because you've all got computers. But Thompson Chain is great and it follows themes to the Bible and it's brilliant. And it's also got the words of Jesus in red.

[17 : 05] And this is the only place beyond the gospels, maybe in Revelation, that there's some red print. And there's red print here, 2 Corinthians 12, where Jesus speaks directly to Paul and says, My grace is sufficient for you.

For My power is made perfect in weakness. Do you see the words? Do you see them in red? Maybe that is especially what you need to hear from Jesus Christ in your life.

You know, God's answer, maybe to your prayer, is this answer that He gives to Paul. He's look, the power you're looking for is in My love and is in My grace.

And that's what He continues to remind us of. We come to the place, I think we're always coming to the place. I don't know if we ever arrive, to be honest, where we appreciate that Jesus and His ways are not our ways.

Again this morning, the link, the way of the cross was not what the people were expecting, it's not what they were wanting. But as we go on in the faith, we begin to understand that His ways are different from ours and they're higher than ours.

[18 : 29] And Isaiah 55 speaks about that, Romans 11 says, they're unsearchable. We just can't have all the answers and we can't have all the answers the way we want them, but that He promises that He is doing His work.

Sometimes He's rooting out a selfish idol from our hearts that we need to face up to and admit. But often we want to just hold on to that idol and we want the blessing and we want things our way and we want Jesus because that's the battle that we're consistently facing as Christians.

But the enjoyment of His grace is predicated on the confession of our need. It's on confession of our weakness. It's on confession of you and I saying we are impotent in the face of our own sin and that we need a Savior.

And we need Him to deal with that insidious enemy of pride which wells up within us in a million different ugly serpent heads.

And He wants to take that and make us like Himself. So it's good to turn to God. It's also great to recognize that pride is actually worse than suffering.

[19 : 56] Pride is worse than suffering because pride will always say, well, I don't actually need God. Because we autonomously breathe and have health and have gifts and have life from Him.

It's easy for us as Christians to live with a shallow nod towards heaven with our Bible barely open from day to day with the pathway to prayer covered in weeds because we've allowed ourselves to think we don't need God in our lives.

And the whole idea of suffering for our faith, suffering because we're Christians or maybe any bad things at all in our lives just leaves us angry and frustrated and we blame God and we say prayer doesn't work and we question Him.

But He may well be saying to us this evening, it's you I want, it's your heart I want, it's the idols out of your heart that I'm looking for and my answer is no.

It is good to ask and it's good to plead but there's also a time to stop and start boasting in our weakness and our suffering for Christ's sake and recognizing that His strength is sufficient for us and His grace enables us and takes us through.

[21 : 37] And again, I'm particularly focusing on the sufferings we face because we are Christians which broaden out into wider persecutions.

So pride is worse than suffering because it says I don't need God but it also says I don't need others. Pride says I don't need others, I'm self-sufficient.

I don't need God and I don't really need other people. A friend in need is a pain in the neck. We don't really want to be burdened by the sufferings of others.

We shut out other people's sufferings because we know it's going to be costly for us to be involved and we can become because of that either overwhelmed by what we see or self-absorbed.

We can become blind to the needs of those of our fellow Christians who are suffering and in pain and we can become content not to be a channel of grace to other people where we can be the answer to their need and we can be the one who begin to alleviate their suffering by coming alongside them and serving them.

[22 : 58] So there's an element in which suffering can have a great redemptive aspect in our lives as it drives us towards God and also helps us to recognize our love outward towards others for Christ's sake.

We look around us, don't we, and we see the suffering of others and seek to help them. And this evening we pray for grace to be concerned about the persecuted church, our brothers and sisters, particularly this evening when we focus on Afghanistan and their needs and the reality of their suffering.

Helen Keller wrote a great thing. She wrote many great things, but she said, believe when you are most unhappy that there is something for you to do in the world so long as you can sweeten another's pain.

Life is not in vain, not a great quote. So long as you can sweeten another's pain, life is not in vain.

And that's a great act of service to other people and it shows in that instance God not using a messenger of Satan but using one of his own children to bring alleviation to people's pain and suffering.

[24 : 32] So I'm not sure what is going to happen in Afghanistan and it may seem that prayers of a few people here in the middle of Edinburgh for that nation and for the Christians in that nation isn't going to make a great deal of difference, but I beg to differ.

And it's a great recognition of our association with Christians throughout the world and our duty in our weakness and in our vulnerability and helplessness to pray for them.