

III. Again this passage focuses on susceptibility; this time to the promise of the removal of pain. God does have a plan for the removal of suffering in the long term. In-as-much, Christianity often comes under attack for offering a too much delayed hope. However, as C.S. Lewis pointed out many years ago in his sermon “The Weight of Glory,” the world is full of promises that are truly false on this score. For example, he points to the 20th Century promises of modern education - with an emphasis on technology. Lewis explains that the modernists believed that earth can be made into heaven, but that it will take a long time (no one really knows how long). In what areas of life to you see “false prophets” today thriving on distracting people from facing weakness and suffering and death?

IV. Ravi Zacharias says "What God whispers to us in our pleasure, He shouts to us in our pain." Has this been your experience?

V. Read Chapter 5 of Lamentations. Note the conditions and circumstances of the people of God in this time of exile and abandonment. Now turn to chapter 3 of Lamentations to discover the faith of some in the midst of this pain and suffering. Associated with the prophet Jeremiah, and in response to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in about 587 BC, this book of the Bible has something to teach about the attitude Christians must have in the face of difficulty and weakness.

- The writer suggests God’s mercies are often hidden and hard to recognize when they are happening. He does “cause grief” (verse 32). He does “afflict” (verse 33). But all this serves another purpose – a merciful purpose – if we trust him. How might this be the case?

VI. In the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:13) we are encouraged to pray: “lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” or “save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil”. How does this help us in our dealings with weakness and suffering?

#10 Subject of Suffering

2 Corinthians 11.16-12.10

But (God) said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. 2 Corinthians 12:9

Warm up

Woody Allen- famous for making self-flagellating, autobiographical satires was once quoted as saying, “Life is full of misery, loneliness, and suffering - and it's all over much too soon.” Many people have a desire for more of life, but frustration with the suffering that accompanies so many of our experiences. Discuss with others what percentage of your experiences of suffering in life have been a necessary part of a positive life experience (e.g. child-birth, training for an event).



Introduction

The Apostle Paul, as we saw last week, was in the midst of a somewhat sarcastic rhetorical argument that we find in chapters 10-13 of 2 Corinthians. He has been forced to compare his own “credentials” as an apostle with those Johnny-come-lately “super-apostles” who have assumed a role of leadership. They have based their authority on their own self-admiration and persuasive powers. They claimed to be wise; having stories of great miracles and visions; and they imposed systems of rules and regulations for the Corinthians to follow. They had beguiled some Corinthians into following what Paul called “another Jesus”. Not only this, but



they had been undermining Paul's authority as a true apostle of Christ while he was away from Corinth. In chapters 11 and 12, Paul now resorts to detailing his own credentials for being recognized as a great Christian leader. What we read, however, is quite the opposite of the memoirs his opponents may well have penned about themselves.

Getting into the text

READ 2 Corinthians chapter 11

1. How is the suffering Paul endured a subject of boasting?
2. Would the lack of payment and frequent suffering work on a ministry resume today? Why/Why not?
3. What dangers do you think most Christian leaders today would face to spread the gospel?



4. What dangers would you face?

READ 2 Corinthians 12

5. When Paul says "in the body" or "out of the body" what do you think he means?
6. Most believe the "man in Christ" Paul is referring to is himself. Explain why you agree/disagree.
7. What do you think Paul means by "thorn in my flesh?"

8. How do you think our weakness could make Christ's power perfect?

What Paul summarizes as weaknesses in verse 9 he spells out in four other words in verse 10: **insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.**

- Insults -- when people think of clever ways of making your faith or your life-style or your words look stupid or weird or inconsistent.
- Hardships -- circumstances forced upon you, reversals of fortune against your will. This could refer to any situation where you feel trapped. You didn't plan it or think it would be this way.
- Persecutions -- wounds or abuses or painful circumstances or acts of prejudice or exploitation from people because of your Christian faith or your Christian moral commitments. It's when you are not treated fairly. You get a raw deal.
- Calamities (or distresses or difficulties or troubles) -- the idea is one of pressure or crushing or being weighed down; circumstances that tend to overcome you with stress and tension.

9. How does Paul's attitude about hardships, weakness, insults, persecutions and difficulties different from most Christians you know? How is it different from you?

Going Further

- I. John Piper says, "One of the reasons Biblical Christianity has to be so drastically distorted in order to sell it to mass markets is that the market wants power to escape weakness in leisure, but Christianity offers power to endure weakness in love." Discuss how this quote is a truism today.
- II. Someone once asked C.S. Lewis, "Why do the righteous suffer?" "Why not?" he replied. "They're the only ones who can take it." Why might we consider Christians better equipped than others to cope with suffering?