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Sermon Brief
Text: 2 Cor. 12:1-10
Title: When Life Doesn't Work Right
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Seeking to faith-
fully proclaim
the whole coun-
cil of God in
scripture!



INTRODUCTION

What do you do when life doesn't work right? Many people assume that when one becomes a believer that life immediately begins flowing smoothly and that all troubles and difficulties disappear. If you listen to many TV preachers, you would conclude that this is what happens. They paint a rosy picture of an idyllic life for the believing Christian. God will bless you with good health and with prosperity, they promise. The so-called "prosperity gospel" or 'word of faith' teaching by many preachers comes not from above but from below. Thousands of people around the world have been deceived and deluded into thinking that if I'm not wealthy and healthy as a Christian, then something is wrong with me.

But as every believer in the day to day world knows, life doesn't work like that for a Christian. Everyday living remains tough with bills to be paid, joblessness to cope with, illness and sickness to deal with -- on and on I could go. Particularly right now with the global recession taking its toll on millions of individuals around the world, the harsh reality is that life can be awfully harsh. Many of you are experiencing some of that now with huge challenges in front of you every day. So what to do?

I think the apostle Paul provides some very helpful insight for us in this situation. In 2 Cor. 12:1-10, he is writing to the believers at Corinth defending his right and authority as a divinely called apostle of Christ. Hear his words:¹

1 It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. 2 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. 3 And I know that such a person — whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows — 4 was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. 5 On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. 6 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, 7 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. 8 Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, 9 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. 10 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.

For we believers today struggling with life's difficulties, Paul has two basic points to say to us: **When life doesn't work right, 1) we're not spiritually inferior**, and **2) we have a chance to experience true divine power**.

Some background on our text is important so that we can better understand these points from our passage. 12:1-10 comes as a part of a larger discussion in chapters ten through thirteen in 2 Corinthians. In these chapters Paul is vigorously defining his apostleship against some teachers in Corinth who claimed that both his claim to being an apostle was suspect but their claims to being an apostle of Christ were true. Consequently, they were teaching a superior version of the gospel, and Paul was teaching a woefully deficient version. What did they base this on? Evidently several assertions were made to back up their claim of superiority to the apostle Paul. One of the more prominent criticisms that Paul gives particularly attention to

¹Greek NT

12.1 Καυχᾶσθαι δεῖ, οὐ συμφέρον μὲν, ἐλεύσομαι δὲ εἰς ὄπτασίας καὶ ἀποκαλύψεις κυρίου. 12.2 οἶδα ἄνθρωπον ἐν Χριστῷ πρὸ ἐτῶν δεκατεσσάρων, εἴτε ἐν σώματι οὐκ οἶδα, εἴτε ἐκτὸς τοῦ σώματος οὐκ οἶδα, ὁ θεὸς οἶδεν, ἄρπαγέντα τὸν τοιοῦτον ἕως τρίτου οὐρανοῦ. 12.3 καὶ οἶδα τὸν τοιοῦτον ἄνθρωπον, εἴτε ἐν σώματι εἴτε χωρὶς τοῦ σώματος οὐκ οἶδα, ὁ θεὸς οἶδεν, 12.4 ὅτι ἠρπάγη εἰς τὸν παράδεισον καὶ ἤκουσεν ἄρρητα ῥήματα ἃ οὐκ ἐξὸν ἀνθρώπῳ λαλήσαι. 12.5 ὑπὲρ τοῦ τοιούτου καυχῆσομαι, ὑπὲρ δὲ ἐμαυτοῦ οὐ καυχῆσομαι εἰ μὴ ἐν ταῖς ἀσθενείαις. 12.6 ἐὰν γὰρ θελήσω καυχῆσασθαι, οὐκ ἔσομαι ἄφρων, ἀλήθειαν γὰρ ἐρῶ· φείδομαι δέ, μὴ τις εἰς ἐμὲ λογίσηται ὑπὲρ ὃ βλέπει με ἢ ἀκούει [τι] ἐξ ἐμοῦ 12.7 καὶ τῇ ὑπερβολῇ τῶν ἀποκαλύψεων. διὸ ἵνα μὴ ὑπεραίρωμαι, ἐδόθη μοι σκόλοψ τῇ σαρκί, ἄγγελος Σατανᾶ, ἵνα με κολαφίζῃ, ἵνα μὴ ὑπεραίρωμαι. 12.8 ὑπὲρ τουτοῦ τρίς τὸν κύριον παρεκάλεσα ἵνα ἀποστῆ ἀπ' ἐμοῦ. 12.9 καὶ εἴρηκέν μοι, Ἄρκει σοι ἡ χάρις μου, ἡ γὰρ δύναμις ἐν ἀσθενείᾳ τελεῖται. ἥδιστα οὖν μᾶλλον καυχῆσομαι ἐν ταῖς ἀσθενείαις μου, ἵνα ἐπισκηνώσῃ ἐπ' ἐμὲ ἡ δύναμις τοῦ Χριστοῦ. 12.10 διὸ εὐδοκῶ ἐν ἀσθενείαις, ἐν ὕβρεσιν, ἐν ἀνάγκαις, ἐν διωγμοῖς καὶ στενοχωρίαις ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ· ὅταν γὰρ ἀσθενῶ, τότε δυνατὸς εἰμι.

in our text was that they were experiencing direct communication with God through visions and revelations, and that Paul wasn't. Therefore he had an inferior Christian experience and thus an inferior gospel message. They then pointed to Paul's ongoing health problems as evidence of his inferior experience. The fact that he didn't take money from the Corinthians when he was in Corinth earlier was indication that he wasn't authentic. He wasn't a skilled orator in preaching the Gospel; this was a weakness that signaled an inferior message. Numerous criticisms of him had been leveled by these so-called 'super apostles' as a way to diminish Paul's influence over the Corinthians, while they were trying to gain control over the believers for their own profit.

Just like in today's world, some preachers want power and influence over congregations. Not so they can help the church. Instead, so they can drain every penny of money possible from the church for their own personal profit. Paul was dealing with this kind of situation at Corinth. Unfortunately, preachers like these still exist in Christian churches of our day. And through the influence of radio and TV, many have become unbelievably wealthy and hold enormous influence over congregations and believers way beyond the particular church they may pastor.

Their false doctrine of prosperity and wealth through the gospel has left countless numbers of sincere believers deceived and feeling that something must be wrong with them spiritually since they're not getting wealthy as a believer, and because they have all kinds of health problems that don't seem to be going away. Thus we need to hear what Paul can say to us about this, lest we be deceived as well.

BODY

When life doesn't work right:

I. We're not spiritually inferior, vv. 1-4

In the first four verses of our text, Paul makes some very important points about boasting and spiritual visions.

First, boasting, v. 1. Paul begins by saying that it is necessary to boast. We must not take that statement out of context. Paul uses the verb *καυχάομαι*, here translated as 'boast,' some twenty times in 2 Corinthians alone, out a total of 37 uses throughout the New Testament. But the context of his usage here in 12:1 is defined by statements like in 11:30, "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness" (NRSV). And also in 12:11, "I have been a fool! You forced me to it. Indeed, you should have been the ones commending me, for I am not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing" (NRSV). Paul only hesitatingly takes about his personal experiences because he felt compelled to counter the claims of his enemies at Corinth. And he is very uncomfortable talking about 'visions and revelations' from the Lord, particularly as understood by the Corinthians.

Talking about one's spiritual experience, especially particularly dramatic experiences, poses a real temptation to every believer. One's 'boasting' can quickly turn into spiritual exhibitionism and become arrogant pride and elitism. Paul's enemies at Corinth evidently did this quite extensively, and then used it as a leverage to gain influence over the Corinthians. He already in this letter (cf. 5:12) had accused these people of boasting "in outward appearance and not in the heart" (NRSV). Paul countered their phoney boasting with a 'boast' of his own, but it had different tones. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he had set the tone for boasting with a quote from the Old Testament in Jeremiah 9:23-24 (1 Cor. 1:31): "As it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord'" (NRSV). At the beginning of this discussion in chapter ten, Paul repeated this OT text (2 Cor. 10:17): "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord" (NRSV).

Once Paul said it is necessary to boast, he quickly qualified that with "nothing is to be gained by it" (NRSV; *οὐ συμφέρον μὲν*). What did he mean? And then in the next statements he goes on to do some boasting. Is he not serious with saying that nothing profitable comes out of boasting? At first reading his words seem like double talk with no clear meaning. But once his statement is evaluated in the larger context, it becomes clear that he really did mean that nothing really profitable comes out of boasting. The false teachers were attempting to use their boast of visions and revelations to assert their superiority over Paul. But did their boast actually prove they were superior? Absolutely not! All it accomplished was to expose their falseness! And their utter lack of genuine spiritual insight. Furthermore, it would not ultimately validate Paul's claim to apostleship, if his boasting were exclusively centered on recounting dramatic spiritual experience from visions and revelations.

Second, visions and revelations, vv. 2-4. So what then is he doing in verses two through four? Here he recounts a visionary experience of an individual some fourteen years earlier:

2 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. 3 And I know that such a person — whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows — 4 was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat..

One of the interpretive mysteries of these verses is the identity of the man that Paul refers to here. At first, the apostle seems to be alluding to an acquaintance, whose experience Paul know little about. But most scholars see Paul referring to his own personal experience, but in a very oblique way in order to de-emphasize the importance of his visionary experience.

In two parallel depictions he describes the experience of this individual:

v2:

I know a man
in Christ
fourteen years ago
whether in the body I don't know
or out of the body I don't know
God knows
who was snatched up into the 3rd heaven

vv. 3-4

I know such a man
whether in the body
or out of the body I don't know
God knows
he was snatched up into Paradise
he heard unutterable words no one can speak

What Paul depicts here is a spiritual experience that provided no functional information that could be shared with others. It was just a very dramatic experience of coming into the overwhelming presence of Almighty God. Paul can't say whether it happened bodily or just mentally; he doesn't recall that detail. He doesn't know what it was that the individual heard God saying, since these words were un-repeatable.

Whether Paul is referring to another individual, or to himself indirectly, the point remains the same: he goes out of his way to devalue the importance of visions and revelations as validating anything. The experience was personal and affirmed the individual inwardly. But it provided nothing that could benefit anyone else. So what was the point of talking about it? Very little. Paul only mentioned it because his opponents were recounting similar kinds of supposed experiences and then claiming that such experiences made them superior to the apostle Paul.

What are we to make of this in application to our day? The vision and revelation that Paul describes provided no deeper understanding of the Gospel that could be shared with others. Thus it had very little real value. Oh, it did affirm the individual, but it didn't help him in ministry. And that's exactly Paul's point. Dramatic spiritual experience must lead to ministry to others if it has legitimacy. Paul had a dramatic visionary experience on the Damascus road that changed his life. And subsequent to that occasional revelations from the Lord came to him providing instruction and guidance in decision making for ministry. But here is the only place in his writings where a visionary experience is described just for the experiencing of it without any ministry benefit. And Paul clearly has little use for such religious experience.

Religious experience should play a very secondary role in shaping our approach to ministry. It must always be determined by the boundaries of scriptural teaching and guidance. The Bible defines whether our religious experience is valid or not; not the other way around. And yet, this is hard to put into practice. We are always tempted to let "the tail wag the dog" rather than the opposite. The Bible is the final authoritative divine revelation; not our emotional based experiences.

Thus if we don't have these kinds of dramatic experiences, are we somehow inferior to other believers who claim to have them? NOT IN THE LEAST! comes Paul's reply. We are no less spiritual without such experiences. Our relationship with God cannot be called into question on the basis of the absence of such visionary experience. Furthermore, people claiming such experiences -- and especially those boasting about them -- have no superior spirituality whatsoever. In fact, their spiritual life just possibly is less mature than yours, since they have focused on "outward appearance and not on the heart" (NRSV), as Paul declared in 5:12. They have missed the real point by putting their emphasis in the wrong place.

Don't ever let anyone convince you that your religious experience is not real or not genuine just because you haven't had some dramatic visionary encounter with the Lord.

II. We have a chance to experience true divine power, vv. 5-10

In the second section of our text Paul comes to his major point for the entire passage: "whenever I am weak, then I am strong." Here is where Paul's insight from God ran counter to the thinking of the Corinthians, and especially to his enemies at Corinth. For them outward appearance was the validation of spiritual authority. But for Paul God's validation lay in an entirely different direction.

When do you experience God's presence at the highest level? When everything is flowing smoothly and no problems are plaguing you? I seriously doubt it. No, most believers only experience the deeper, more powerful presence of God during times of difficulty and hardship. And that was Paul's experience as well. When he was 'weak,' that is, was facing difficulties for some reason, that was when he felt the closest to God. He shared one particular example of a weakness that had become a channel of God's power in his life: his so-called 'thorn in the flesh' (σκόλοψ τῆ σαρκί). Earlier in 11:30-33, he had shared another 'weak' moment where God's power become clear in his escape from King Aretas of Damascus. But here he alludes to some

kind of physical malady that plagued him for a considerable period of time. Because Paul's description of the problem is couched only in figurative language -- a thorn, a messenger from Satan etc. -- rather than in specific physical designations, we don't know exactly what it was. One of the oldest views that goes back to the second century AD is that Paul had contracted one of the fevers that were common in the region of Cilicia where he grew up. Or, that he on one of the missionary trips through either Cilicia or Galatia had contracted the fever, perhaps malaria. From what he wrote to the Galatians about having to write with extra large letters at the end of Galatians (cf. 6:11 - "See what large letter I make when I am writing in my own hand!"), the view has emerged that the sickness damaged Paul's eyesight and made it difficult for him to see clearly. Earlier in that same letter,² Paul alluded to a condition that made his appearance rather repulsive. With the town of Laodicea in that general region being a famous center for the treatment of eye disease problems,³ this seemingly adds more weight to this ancient tradition. This information has been linked to Paul's thorn in 2 Corinthians with the conclusion that his illness had to do with eye problems that both disfigured his face and probably created a drainage with a repulsive odor. Although this old traditional identification of Paul's 'thorn in the flesh' is not clearly proven by the available information, it does point in the established direction of his problem being some kind of physical malady.

For the apostle, this thorn came as a source of repeated temptation from Satan to stray off of God's path. Indeed it tormented Paul in causing him continual pain and discomfort (με κολαφίζη). So the malady, what ever it was, created considerable difficulty for the apostle. Thus, Paul asked God three separate times to remove it. Did not God want him healthy in order to better serve Christ? Many preachers in our day would answer yes to that question. But God didn't say yes; instead, the Lord said no to Paul's request for healing, with the added insight, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." Out of this divine wisdom about disease and illness came Paul's understanding of the high purpose of his thorn. He had bracketed his description of the malady with the repeated statement that the thorn was "to keep me from being too elated" (ἵνα μὴ ὑπεραίρωμαι). The repeating of this phrase and the placing of it on either side of the 'thorn' description serves to highlight the importance of the objective that God had in allowing Paul to be afflicted with this thorn. Paul's malady kept him humbled and dependent on God, and thus avoiding the tendency to pride and arrogance about his superior religious experience, unlike his enemies. Afflictions bring us closer to God and led us to realize just how much we constantly need Him.

Thus in Paul's weakness he discovered the power of God at work at a level he otherwise would not have known. The value of this insight then led Paul to say, "I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ, for whenever I am weak, then I am strong."

For we who live in a pleasure oriented western culture, the value of pain is hard to grasp. I think the US culture is even more oriented toward pleasure and avoidance of pain than European culture. And thus the lessons of Paul are very, very hard to learn. But sometimes God can get through to us with this precious insight.

Let me share a bit of personal history at this point. About this time of the year some eight years ago the pain in my feet that I had felt for a long time shot up to very intense levels. Through the diagnosis of several doctors over the next six months I realized that I had high blood pressure, high cholesterol, osteoarthritis from my ankles to the base of my skull, type 2 diabetes, and prostate cancer. These discoveries came from April through August of 2001. The diabetes had created a condition called diabetic induced peripheral neuropathy. This caused extremely high levels of pain in my legs, and especially in my feet. So much so that by the end of the summer I could hardly walk. In fact, I couldn't walk over a block and that would take me half an hour or more. Climbing stairs, more than a couple of steps, were completely out of the picture. Quickly I had to begin using a walking cane in order to keep my balance and to not fall. That summer was the darkest period of my entire life. Fortunately the doctors caught the cancer just before it spread to other parts of my body, and cancer surgery in December of that year solved the cancer problem. But the neuropathy pain continued to increase and limit my walking and standing. I was never free of severe pain that was almost immobilizing. At one point the neurologist and the pain doctor was poised to begin a series of shots to kill all nerve function from my waist down to my feet so that I could gain some relief. My body could not continue enduring these severe levels of pain without triggering a heart attack or some other life threatening issue. But in the summer of 2007 God began a slow process of giving me some relief. And then in January of 2008 a dramatic recovery set in. To be sure, I'm never free of fairly high levels of pain in my feet and elsewhere in my body. But these levels have gone down sufficiently to where I can manage them okay and can get around without difficulty.

Through all of that God taught me some invaluable lessons. Most of all, that pain and suffering can indeed

²Gal. 4:14-15 (NRSV): though my condition put you to the test, you did not scorn or despise me, but welcomed me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. What has become of the goodwill you felt? For I testify that, had it been possible, you would have torn out you eyes and given them to me."

³Note Jesus' admonition to the Laodiceans in Rev. 3:18 to buy salve "to anoint your eyes so that you may see." This was an ironical play off the healing center for eye disease located in the city.

be a gift of God. I learned much, much more about what Paul said to the Corinthians about his pain and suffering. And I have come to appreciate the wisdom of his words profoundly. When knowing Christ is the highest priority of our life, then whatever brings us closer to Him has tremendous value and importance. This was Paul's discovery. And mine as well. And I suspect for many of you also. When you have lived life as long as I have, you begin discovering that success is not measured by happiness and pleasure. Spiritual success is anchored on to knowing Christ in His fullness during our lifetime. Paul put it so well to the Philippians (Phil. 3:8-9):

I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.

When the TV preachers promise you health and wealth if you will send them some money, don't you believe a word these religious hucksters are telling you! Their words are a lie straight out of Hell itself, and they stand as false angels of light masquerading as servants of God, just like the Devil himself. When well-meaning Christians tell you that the reason God didn't heal you of your disease just because you didn't believe hard enough, don't you believe a word they're saying. No one word like this comes from God or out of scripture.

Life is often hard and hard. Disease and sickness are real and not always curable. God's blessings on us don't guarantee physical health. There's a far more important spiritual reality taking place here. And it is to know Christ in all His fullness. And if physical pain and suffering opens up that fullness into our life, the praise be to God for the blessing of pain! In it and through it, we have come to know Christ in ways otherwise impossible.

CONCLUSION

What shall we say then? Is pain and suffering bad? Yes, they are real and hurtful. But in the midst of them we discover with the apostle Paul, God's grace is more than sufficient to enable us to cope. His power can enable us to manage our pain and bring glory to Him as others around us notice our unusual approach to pain and suffering.

My dear, dear people, when life doesn't work right for you, don't ever conclude that something's wrong with you. No, nothing's wrong with you spiritually when you're having hardships in life. To the contrary, God is most likely trying to teach you something more valuable than a bank full of money. He is saying to you, "My child, in your pain come to Me. Let me hold your hand and walk with you through all your suffering. Then you will know indeed My presence and sustaining power."

May God help us learn the lessons of Paul. Validation from God comes primarily through our weaknesses, and seldom, if ever, through our strengths!