

Route 66

2 Corinthians: Boasting of Suffering

Part 47 – January 9, 2011



Paul opens this letter to the Corinthians, with greetings from himself and the young Timothy:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the church of God in Corinth ... – 2 Corinthians 1:1 NIV



The ancient city of Corinth was so infamous for debauchery that the Greek verb for practicing sexual immorality was “to Corinthianize”! Paul spent 18 months here, in this environment, founding the church.



Little wonder, that in his absence, the believers end up behaving so badly that Paul has to write a scathing letter or two. It seems, from the text, that “Second” Corinthians is Paul’s *third* letter.

Happily, his rebukes have their intended effect:

Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it – I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while – yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. – 2 Corinthians 7:8-9 NIV

Notice that line: “you became sorrowful as God intended”. That’s often referred to as “Godly sorrow”; it’s the appropriate regret believers should experience when we violate God’s Word and will.

Do you know how Godly sorrow differs from *worldly* sorrow? Worldly sorrow is brainfelt distress for getting caught, looking bad, or suffering consequences; and it leads to self-loathing. Godly sorrow is heartfelt remorse for disrupting the intimacy in my relationship with the Lord; and it leads to reconciliation.

Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. – 2 Corinthians 7:10 NIV

Now there’s a whole new problem: the Corinthian church had been infiltrated by false teachers, with impressive credentials, who were claiming that Paul was a fraud and a con artist!

They said he was going to pocket the money the Corinthians had vowed to give him for the famine-stricken Jews in Jerusalem.

Paul humorously refers to these men as *super apostles* (11:5; 12:11) as he defends his ministry. And, thanks to these trouble makers, Paul gives more personal history here than in any other letter.

For instance, only in this letter does Paul mention that he had been “caught up to the third Heaven” (12:2). And I bring it up only because it baffles every new believer who stumbles across it. Also, it’s the basis for the Mormon doctrine of the three levels of Heavenly kingdoms: Celestial, Terrestrial, and Telestial.



In Paul’s day, it was common to refer to *three* separate heavens. And all three are mentioned in the Bible *with* descriptions.

The 1st heaven is the “Atmospheric Heaven” (*a.k.a. the sky*); when Noah entered the ark “... the floodgates of the *heavens* were opened”. (Gen. 7:11) The 2nd heaven is the “Astronomic Heaven” (*a.k.a. outer space*); when God blessed Abraham, He said, “Look up at the *heavens* and count the stars”. (Gen. 15:5) The 3rd heaven is “The Abode of God” (*Heaven-Heaven*); and this is the one Paul is referring to.

This is one of Paul’s *many* “boasts” in this book. He uses the word “boast” 31 times in six chapters! It’s not an ego trip; he’s defending his credentials ... and he’s ill at ease doing it.

In this self-confident boasting I am not talking as the Lord would, but as a fool. ... I have made a fool of myself, but you drove me to it. – 2 Corinthians 11:17 & 12:11 NIV

His point in all this “boasting” is that a charlatan or swindler wouldn’t endure the suffering he’s willingly undergone for God.



Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea ... – 2 Corinthians 11:24-25 NIV

And don’t think he’s whining or complaining. Look how he portrays these horrendous sufferings earlier in the letter:

For our **light and momentary troubles** are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. – 2 Corinthians 4:17 NIV

Light and momentary?! Some of us wouldn’t use those words to describe a dash across the parking lot in a heavy rain!

You see, whenever I have a problem, I actually have *two* problems: First, the problem; and then, the way I *perceive* the problem. My perception of the problem can be a bigger problem than the problem of the problem ... and that's problematic.



Jim McCullar is a poor, small town realtor facing a depressed housing market; but, it doesn't trouble him in the *slightest*. Tuesday night he suddenly had to take his heart medication ... and he just *laughed*.

Maybe you saw him, on Thursday, on TV, receiving a ceremonial Mega Millions check for \$190 million!

Tuesday night, as he compared his numbers, he immediately realized that the ticket in his hand would have *vastly* more value than the sum of his possessions and problems ... once it was redeemed. Now, with that example in mind, listen to Paul again:

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. - 2 Corinthians 4:17 NIV

A sharpened sense of that which causes temporal sadness versus that which offers eternal gladness is vital for peace and joy.

How intensely, how fervently do you suppose Jim held onto that winning ticket after realizing its significance? The suffering Paul describes leaves wounds that heal slowly, and scars that last a lifetime. So, it requires an *intense grasp* on God's love, and a *fervent hope* in His purpose and promises. Paul gives the Corinthian believers a great example:

... we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. - 2 Corinthians 8:1b-2 NIV

Any crisis, no matter *how* catastrophic, when viewed in the light of God's eternal goodness, diminishes in its power to overwhelm.

And being much wealthier than the Macedonians, Paul expects them to fulfill their vow to bless the famine-stricken Jews, which will help build a bridge between Jewish and gentile believers.

Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. - 2 Corinthians 9:7 NIV

Are you a cheerful giver? When that basket went by, were you laughing? Smiling?

There are four different motivations for giving to God:

1. Survival - Do the bare minimum to stay "saved".
2. Duty - Do what I don't want to do 'cause God says I have to.

3. Opportunity – Invest in God ‘cause I’ll be getting’ blessed.
4. Delight – give generously with gratitude, ‘cause I’ve been given a winning ticket to the ultimate, mega, eternal jackpot!

Which one do you operate from most of the time?

Two natures beat within my breast, the one is foul, the other blessed. The one I love, the other I hate, the one I feed, will dominate. - *Anonymous*



The cheerfulest aren't those for whom life has been easiest, but, like the Macedonians, have found their deepest level of purpose, joy, meaning, worth, and fulfillment in the Gospel. This is a power that is only born of humility.

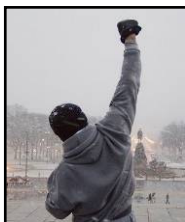
To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. - 2 Corinthians 12:7 NIV

As Job's "comforters" came to realize, not all sickness or adverse circumstances are caused by sin. And even those *caused* by sin, or sent from Satan himself, can serve God's purpose when given to Him.

Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." - 2 Corinthians 12:8-9a NIV

God didn't give Paul what he asked for; but He did give him what he most truly needed for the reshaping of his character. And to Paul's surprise this disease or deformity or whatever it was, not only failed to hinder his ministry, but provided Paul with a previously unrealized effectiveness (born of humility).

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. - 2 Corinthians 12:9b-10 NIV



When we're not in control, we're forced to depend *completely* on God. And when my faith is tested, my trust is strengthened, and my wisdom is deepened. To be an over-comer you gotta be an under-goer!

Paul's thorn-in-the-flesh means that God's *foremost* purpose is not to make us healthy and wealthy, but to redeem us, and to refine us into His image.

And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness ... - 2 Corinthians 3:18 NIV

There are two major means for transforming us into his likeness:

- A. Truth – through his Word, Spirit, and people.
- B. Trials – through problems, pain ... and people!

If I embrace God's truth in the midst of my trials, I'll likely see how incredibly, consistently, ignorantly self-centered I am. Our culture teaches us that our woundedness (how others treat us), is far more serious than our selfishness (how we treat others).

But the thing is, if I focus on my woundedness, I'll blame my unhappiness on those who have wounded me most; and I'll develop the overwhelming despair that comes from being a perpetual victim. Whereas, if I can see my selfishness, I'll seek forgiveness and the power to *love* those who've wounded me most; and I'll develop the overflowing joy that comes from being a perpetual victor!



For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. – *2 Corinthians 4:6-9 NIV*

If we can sense the Lord at work in the midst of our pain, we'll know the same kind of hope that strengthened and sustained Paul.